

6 The Broken
and Abandoned

NERO
KIZUKA

The Hero Laughs
While Walking the Path of
VENGENCE
a Second
Time





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*"I swore
an oath. I
promised to
kill every
last one of
you."*

KAITO UKEI

*"Dear
brother,
this won't
stop me
from being
your cute
little Mai,
will it?"*

MAI UKEI



“Yes, that’s
right.
You’re my
dear big
brother,
Kaito.”

The
sound
was that
of her
fractured
mind,
splitting
apart.

MAI UKEI

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While Walking the Path of
VENGEANCE
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and Abandoned

NERO KIZUKA

Illustration by SINSORA

YEN
ON
NEW YORK

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The Hero Laughs While Walking the Path of Vengeance a Second Time, Vol. 6

NERO KIZUKA

TRANSLATION BY JAKE HUMPHREY • COVER ART BY SINSORA

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NIDOME NO YUSHA WA FUKUSYU NO MICHIO WARAI AYUMU Vol. 6

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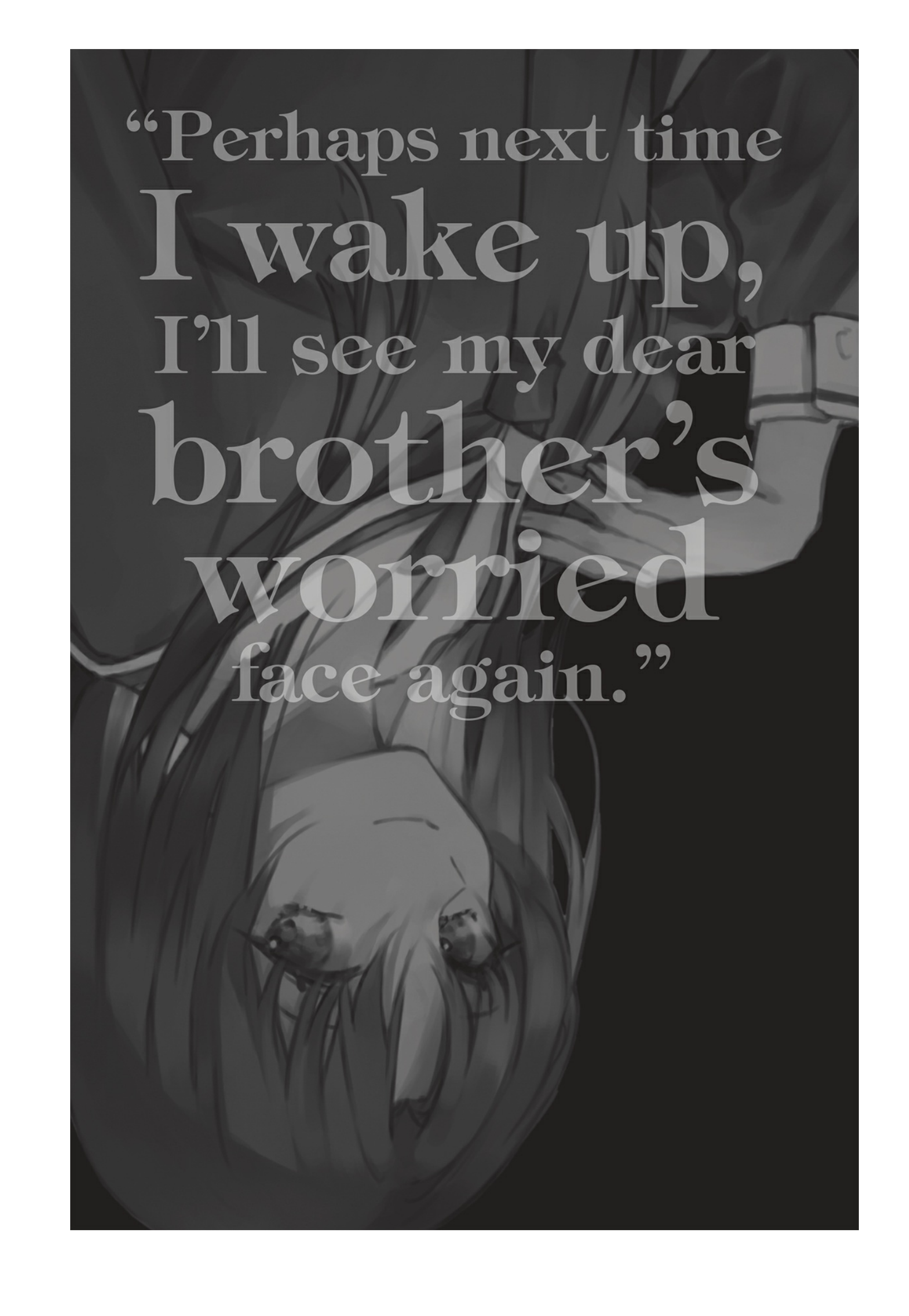
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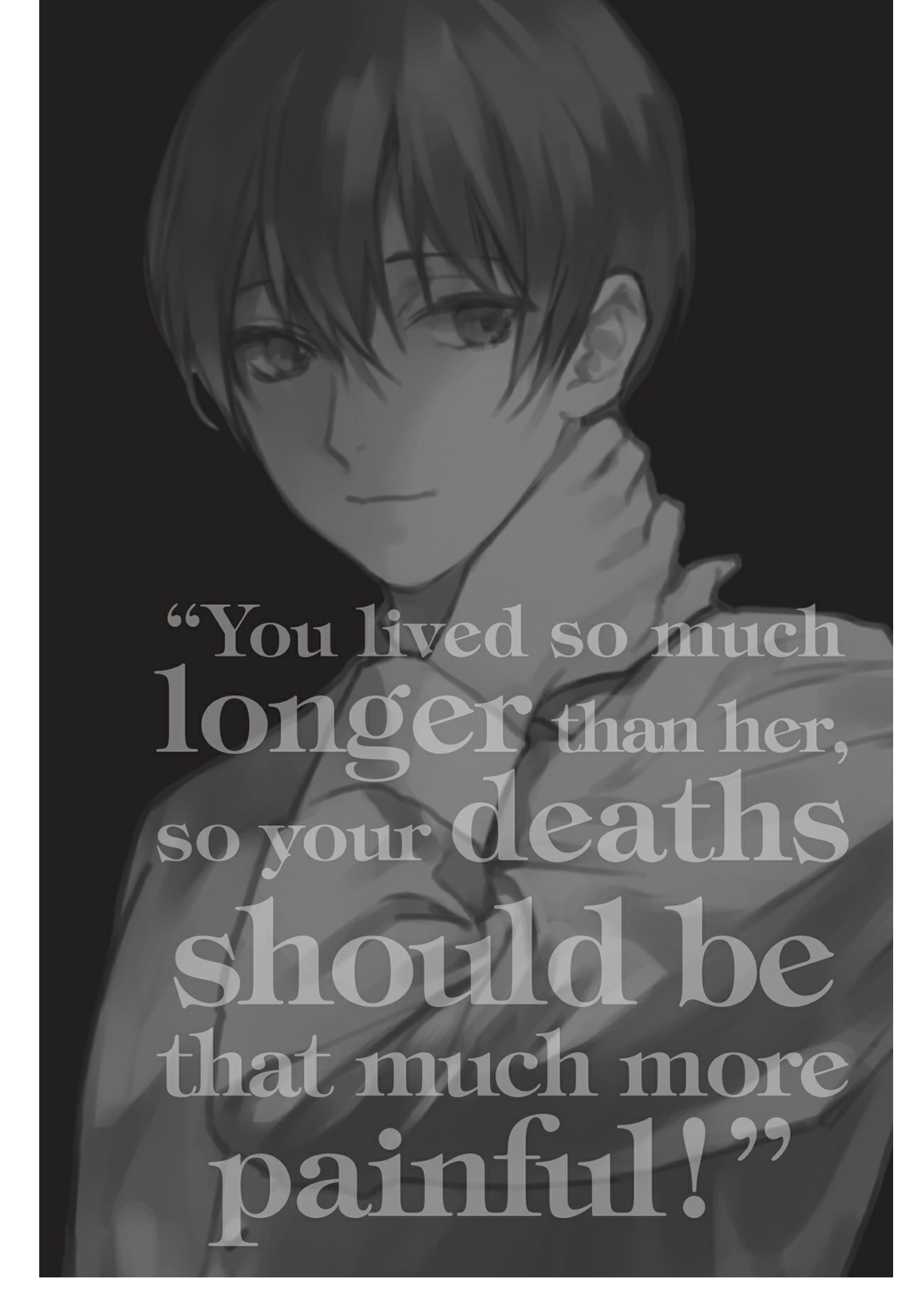
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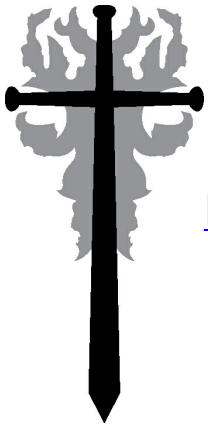
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“Perhaps next time
I wake up,
I’ll see my dear
brother’s
worried
face again.”



“You lived so much
longer than her,
so your deaths
should be
that much more
painful!”



PROLOGUE

Ah, fate was such a fickle mistress.

I'd worked so hard to be pretty for my dear brother, and all I'd ever wanted was a life of peace by his side.

But perhaps this was the way it should be.

After all, my dear brother was all I had left now.

My first taste of blood felt empty, yet blisteringly hot.

I knew it was wrong. I knew it was unethical. I knew it wouldn't lead to the peace I sought.

But if I could stand by my brother's side again and bring destruction to those who'd taken everything away from me...

...then I would gladly give myself over to hell.

After all, hell couldn't possibly be worse than continuing on by myself.

I had to be on the fast track to damnation by now.

But that didn't bother me in the slightest.

For everything I cared about had been taken from me.

I loved you. I still did.

But I hadn't been able to save you. I couldn't save either of you.

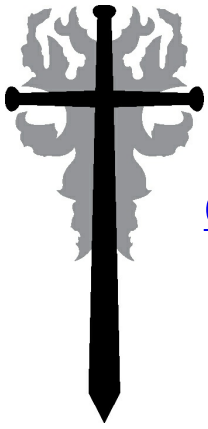
Now that my best friend was back, I could do what he had and learn to accept

my broken self.

Because if I didn't, I would give up and expire sooner or later.

Before I died a worthless death, I needed to settle the score.

Because if I didn't have this, there would be nothing left to connect us.



CHAPTER 1

The Returner Loses His Memories

"...ver for...get... The pain...and...the oath you swore..."

I heard a distant voice. A voice like that of a demon crawling up out of a deep, dark swamp.

Only it was unclear, and I couldn't quite make out what it was trying to say.

All I could sense was the blinding rage that propelled it. An emotion that, against my better judgment, roused me from my slumber.

"Mmm... Mmh..."

When I opened my eyes, I found myself staring at a cream-colored ceiling.

"Where...am I? Argh...my head...it hurts..."

My head was throbbing, as if I'd slept for a thousand years. The only bed in the room was mine, and there wasn't anyone else around, but I heard a persistent *beep-beep-beep*.

It was a hospital room. Yet try as I might, I couldn't recall how I'd ended up here.

"Let's see... I remember I was on class duty yesterday, so I went to school early... Kenta and Suehiko were there. I was chatting with them. Yuuto went upstairs to see his girlfriend, and we gave him crap for it. Then..."

Then what happened? I couldn't remember a thing.

"Pardon me... Oh my god, the patient's awake?! Doctor! Come quickly!!"

A young nurse noticed me the moment she entered the room, then turned around and went running down the hallway screaming. Left to my own devices, I wondered if what the nurse did was standard procedure. Then I got the distinct feeling I was on some sort of soap opera and looked around for any hidden cameras.

I wasn't sure what to do, so I just waited for someone to come back. Before long, an impressive-looking doctor entered the room.

"Oh, good morning, my friend," he said. "You mind if we do a few checkups before we proceed?"

"N-no, go ahead."

The doctor proceeded to pepper me with questions, which I answered, still wondering just what had happened. After opening my smock to let the doctor examine my chest, I was surprised to find it covered in scars.

H-huh? What on earth happened to me?

I tried not to let it show, but I'm sure I would have screamed out in shock at the terrible sight had the doctor not been present. My one saving grace was that the scars didn't hurt at all.

The doctor shone a light into my pupils, asked me to move my arms, and checked my heartbeat with a stethoscope.

"...Well, physically speaking, everything looks good," he said at last. "I was worried about the shoulder wound, but it seems to have healed up nicely, and it doesn't look infected. We'll do a scan and keep you here for two or three days. Then you'll be free to go."

"Er... Doctor? What happened? Some kind of car accident, was it?"

It was the only explanation I could come up with for my injuries and memory loss. It happened all the time on TV. At least I was in a better state than those coma-prone main characters.

However, the room fell completely silent when I asked.

...Huh? What is it? Is it something serious?

The doctors and nurses in the room shared a concerned glance with one

another and nodded before turning back to me.

“Uh...Mr. Ukei, a question, if I may... Exactly how much do you remember?”

“W-well, I was at school, talking to my friends before first period...”

“And what was the date, if I may ask?”

“It was June 8, 2015,” I replied, recalling the sight of my calendar that morning.

My answer caused the medical workers to glance among one another again.

“...Mr. Ukei. I want you to calm down. This may come as a shock, but today’s date is October 13, 2016.”

“...What? Y-you... What?”

“It may be hard to believe, but it’s true,” the doctor said.

“S-so what, you’re saying I lost over a year’s worth of memories? That’s impossible. Or...are you implying I’ve been in a coma for all that time?”

Both ideas sounded ludicrous when I said them out loud. What on earth was the meaning of this?

The doctor shook his head gravely.

“You were first brought to this hospital ten days ago.”

“Oh...I guess that makes sense. If I’d been asleep for a year, I’d barely be able to move... I don’t suppose I just mistook the date, so I guess you’re saying that I lost all my memories of the past year?”

“In my professional opinion, it seems highly likely, yes.”

“I don’t believe it... A whole year...?”

Could this really be happening? Being bedridden for a year sounded crazy enough, but losing a year’s worth of memories was, in some ways, even more unbelievable. I mean, if a year had really passed, that meant I was a third-year student now. I’d have university entrance exams coming up. The National Center Test was only three months away, wasn’t it? How the hell was I going to cope?

“I suspect the amnesia will only be temporary,” said the doctor. “We’ll take you in for an MRI at once. Come with me.”

“O-okay.”

I slipped off the bed, unable to hide my utter shock at these revelations.

“Kaito!! Wh-what’s happened?!”

Just then, a girl threw open the door with such force that it bounced right off the rubber stopper and pinned her in the doorway. A doctor went over to check on her. “Hey, are you all right—? Whoa!” The girl, however, pushed past him, clutching her bruised shoulder and staggering over to me.

“...Kaito. Dear brother. You’re awake. I’m not dreaming, am I? You’re here. You’re back. You’re alive.”

“H-hey, whoa, calm down, you. H-hey, that tickles, cut it out! Ah-ha-ha!”

It was my little sister, Mai. She ran over and threw her arms around me. Then, as if to confirm it was really me, she started running her hands all over my chest, tears in her eyes that seemed on the verge of spilling over at any moment. I couldn’t remember the last time I had seen her so upset.

...Wh...? What’s going on?

As soon as I set my gaze on her, I felt a gut-wrenching pain out of nowhere.

“Kaito...oh, Kaito... *Sob...*”

It really had been over a year since I’d seen her last. It couldn’t have been last night at all. Her hair had grown and her face had matured, but she cried like the same old kid sister I had always known.

“Mai... Ha-ha. I’m sorry. I guess you’ve been worried about me.”

I tried to suppress whatever emotion was forcing its way out of me. It had always been my job as the older brother to comfort Mai when she was sad. I gave her a gentle pat on the head until she calmed down.

“I’ll have to go for a bit,” I said. “They want to do some scans.”

“If you’d like to come with us to the next room, please, Miss Ukei,” said one of the nurses to her. “There’s something we need to tell you...”

“...Okay.”

I parted with Mai, and the nurses led me down the linoleum halls of the hospital.

“Your sister has been worried sick about you,” one of them said. “She’s been coming every day after school to check up on you... Mr. Ukei?! Is something the matter?”

I was crying. I assumed it was because I’d let my sister see me at my weakest.

“N-no, it’s nothing,” I said. “I don’t know why. I just felt so...”

The nurse tittered softly. “I think it’s nice. You don’t often see siblings getting on so well these days.”

“Yeah...you’re right. That’s it. That’s all it is...”

I didn’t think I’d ever wept so hard in my life. Don’t get me wrong, I was happy that my sister cared so much about me, but to cry because of it? If Kenta found out, I’d never hear the end of it. He always said I was obsessed with her.

I wiped my tears and proceeded to the scanning room. Little did I know at the time that Kenta would never make fun of me again.

After the scan, I headed back to my hospital room to find Mai there, along with two unfamiliar men. One, a plump, middle-aged fellow in an old tan suit, and the other a taller, more sharply dressed gentleman in a striking black suit. I assumed they must have been hospital staff.

“...Doctor, please tell me,” asked Mai, standing up from her chair. “Did you find anything wrong with Kaito?”

“The MRI turned up no abnormalities. He’s fine.”

“Don’t worry about me, Mai. In fact, I feel great.”

“...Really? You’re sure you’re feeling okay? You’re not lying to me, are you, dear brother? Did they find out you’ve become even more of an imbecile than you already were?”

Mai held my sleeve and refused to let go. She’d been clingy like that ever since she was a kid. The insults were an old habit, too, and knowing why she did

it, it was hard to tell her to stop. Anyway, I found it endearing, so I didn't complain. To be honest, I sort of enjoyed it.

Come to think of it, isn't it a weekday? Shouldn't you be at school, Mai? It's the middle of the day.

She didn't have to skip school just to come and see me. I was glad she cared, though. Besides, I knew she'd only get mad if I said anything.

"Listen, son. You mind if we have a word?" asked the plump fellow, tactlessly inserting himself into the conversation. "Name's Miyagawa, and I'm with the Iizuka precinct."

"My name's Onishi," said the other gentleman. "Pleased to meet you."

Both of them showed me their badges. "Y-you're with the police?" I asked.

"That's right. We've got a couple of questions for you, young man. You see..."

"Miyagawa. Remember, this boy is still in the hospital. I know the case is important, but I would ask you to refrain from being so heavy-handed."

"You got me there. I suppose I was a little overeager. All right, Onishi, there's no need to look so glum. Did I upset you?"

"Your behavior upsets me."

Miyagawa chuckled while the man in the black suit, Onishi, sighed.

"Er...what's this about?" I ventured.

"Mr. Ukei, please take a seat. There's something we need to tell you."

"O-okay."

We all sat down around a table, and the nurse left to fetch some tea. After a short while, the doctor began speaking.

"As far as we can tell, your injuries should be no impediment to your day-to-day life. Your deepest wounds were those in your shoulders, which have both fully healed. There's no numbness or paralysis, either, but we'd like to keep you under observation here at the hospital for a couple of days, just in case."

"I see. And what about my amnesia?"

That was what I was most concerned about right now.

“We’ve done two MRI scans, but we can’t find anything in your brain to suggest a cause,” the doctor explained. “Your amnesia seems to be purely psychosomatic in nature.”

“So...how long will it take to remember, do you think? I have entrance exams coming up, you see...”

I wasn’t looking forward to cramming in a year’s worth of material in only a few months. Worst-case scenario, I’d fail the exams, and then where would I be?

“Entrance exams? Ah-ha-ha! That’s the least of your worries, son!”

“Mr. Miyagawa, I’m afraid if you don’t treat this poor boy with a little more tact, I’ll have to ask you to leave the room,” said the doctor.

“...You are a handful at times, Miyagawa,” added the other policeman.

“Oh, I do apologize. Me and my big mouth.”

“...Er...what did you mean by that?” I asked, feeling a little apprehensive. Mai clutched my sleeve even tighter.

“Mr. Ukei,” said the doctor. “I want you to stay very calm as I tell you this. First, as I said, you were brought here to the hospital ten days ago. We received a call from your school, where you were found with severe cuts and blood loss, as if you’d been attacked. You had two large stab wounds when you were brought here, one on each shoulder.”

“At school? How did that happen? So...it wasn’t a car accident, then?”

It was starting to dawn on me why these two detectives were here. Something truly sinister must have happened to me.

“I’ll take over the explanation from here, if you don’t mind,” said Miyagawa, raising a cup of freshly poured tea to his lips. “Doubt a doctor will be able to explain anyway. I’ll get the ending out of the way first: Mr. Ukei, you’ve been missing for over sixteen months. The reason you don’t need to worry about entrance exams is because you never made it to third year. Heh, guess you still got finals, though.”

“...What?”

The detective had told me something very unsettling indeed. There was only one question in my mind.

“...You mean...I have to retake second year?”

“Fraid so, son! Ha-ha-ha!”

Miyagawa burst into uproarious laughter, bereft of compassion for my plight. After he finished guffawing, he continued his explanation.

“On June 8, 2015, there was a mass disappearance at Fujinomiya Institute for Secondary Education. Nearly two hundred students and teachers up and vanished into thin air just before classes were due to start.”

“A mass disappearance?” I replied, astounded. “At our school?”

“You heard me right. In fact, it’s being treated as the largest mass disappearance event in history. But the weirdest part is what the witnesses claim to have seen. You know, the other four hundred students, teachers, and staff who were there when shit went down. All of ’em insist they saw some kind of magic circle of light appear around the ones who went missing, about a meter across.”

“...You mean, like, from a game?”

“Something like that, yeah. I tell you, when I saw the video one of ’em took on their phone, I thought it was an ad for a new fantasy movie.”

Miyagawa sat back theatrically in his seat and sighed.

“However,” he continued, “we just can’t seem to get to the bottom of what really happened. How did so many people go missing without a trace? And now you show up. I guess you know what I’m going to say next, don’t you? You were one of the students who went missing that day. The only one we’ve found after more than a year of chasing dead ends. What’s more, you suddenly appeared in the middle of that classroom in a ring of light, just like how you disappeared. Think you can explain all that to me, son? This old man just can’t keep up.”

“...”

“So you really don’t remember anything, do you? You’re our last clue, son. If

you don't give us something, we'll have to pull the plug on the whole investigation."

I disappeared over a year ago? Right in the middle of school, along with nearly two hundred other people? Inside some sort of...what, magic pentagram?

I'd never heard anything so absurd. I could barely process what he was saying.

"What on earth are you talking about?" I asked, the words spilling out before I could stop them. However, my flippant disregard only seemed to anger the detective, Miyagawa.

"You gotta give us somethin'. Your best friends Kenta Kida and Suehiko Ito disappeared that day as well!"

"Th-they did?!"

I could only really half follow the conversation, but hearing the names of my two friends was like a stab to the gut.

"Why are you the only one who's come back?! And how did you return at all?! Where are the others who disappeared with you?!"

"Please, calm yourself, Mr. Miyagawa," said the doctor, but the detective's outburst could not be stopped.

"Shut it! A hundred and eighty-six people went missing, and we'll never know anything unless this boy speaks up! Where have you been the last year and four months?! What do you—?!"

Clatter!

"...Get out. Don't you dare speak to my dear brother that way. Your fat belly is ugly enough without you sticking your snout in the dirt for truffles, pig."

Mai's chair toppled to the floor as she stood, a dark shadow crossing her stern face.

Oh, shit. She's really about to lose it.

The women of our household all hid a deadly poison beneath their gentle facades. Their words were laced with venom at the best of times, but rage only exacerbated it. And Mai was especially protective of her friends and family.

“Settle down, Mai. It’s okay, really...”

“If you can’t stand up for yourself, dear brother, then keep quiet. Otherwise, you’re just wasting oxygen.”

“Oof...”

My little sister chopped me to pieces. It felt more hurtful than usual today for some reason. But this reminder of my usual life came as a welcome reprieve from the otherwise highly unusual events of the day.

“Mr. Miyagawa, I understand how you must feel, but I must insist you leave the boy alone. He’s had enough excitement for one day, I fear,” the doctor added.

“Come on, Miyagawa, listen to the doctor. We’ll come back another time,” Onishi said.

Miyagawa closed his eyes in thought, then spoke.

“...You’re right. Sorry about that. But let me just say one last thing, son. Somewhere in your head is a clue that’ll lead us to the truth. Something that’ll help us bring those hundred and eighty-six people back home. If you remember anything, anything at all, please tell us.”

“...I understand. If I do, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Thank you, son.”

Then the two detectives, Miyagawa and Onishi, stood, bowed deeply, and left the room.



“...Miyagawa, you really must exercise discretion. I know you’re desperate for new leads, but don’t forget what happened last month. If you’re not careful, the public could turn against us at the drop of a hat.”

“Yes, I know. I just wanted to make sure the kid was telling the truth, that’s all. Did he really forget everything?”

Miyagawa shrugged and sighed.

“We’ve been on this case for over a year, Onishi, and what have we got to

show for it? Still, I knew there was something special about the Ukei family. Kaito's parents fell to their deaths on the same day he disappeared, and his aunt and grandmother went missing, too. Those magic circles even came after the sister, and she wasn't anywhere near the school. You really think all that's just a coincidence?"

"I couldn't say," I replied. "Kaito is the only one who's returned, that's true. But don't forget that there were no witnesses around to verify the sister's claim... Still, it's too early to do anything rash. The police have already lost the public's trust once over this case. We have to tread carefully."

I sighed, but Miyagawa only laughed.

"Ha-ha-ha. I don't blame the public, Onishi. We've been on this case for sixteen months without turning up a damn thing."

I was still concerned about the Ukei siblings, though. They were the victims of this case, and I pitied them. I felt we ought to leave them in peace.

"Well, we still have to focus on cleaning up this mess," Miyagawa said. "If the boy can't tell us anything, perhaps he can still act as the bait."

"...Sometimes, Miyagawa, you should keep your thoughts to yourself. Besides, we have officers from every department out pulling weeds these days."

Trust in the police force was at an all-time low, owing to a recent blunder in the handling of this high-profile case. People had gotten killed because of it, and it wasn't something the police could simply cover up. We would be treading on dangerously thin ice for the time being.

"Ha-ha-ha. Good luck to 'em, I say. As long as the roots survive, it doesn't matter how many weeds you pull. They'll always grow right back."

"Just try not to attract public outrage, Miyagawa. Do keep in mind I'm supposed to be monitoring your behavior."

"Sorry 'bout that. But you don't need to worry, Onishi. Anything happens, I'll be the fall guy."

"Miyagawa!"

"Ha-ha-ha!"

I couldn't believe this man.

"Still, Onishi. What do you make of it all? Where's the boy been all this time, huh? You really think he could have...?"

"I presume you're referring to..."

The public had come up with a theory to explain the events they'd witnessed on video, but it was absurd. Laughable. The disappeared people, they said, had been transported to another world.

"It's hard to believe, I must say," I replied. "And unfortunately, there was no video of Kaito coming back. However, he was wearing some rather strange clothes when he reappeared..."

"Onishi, I'm an old dog, you know. I musta watched that video dozens of times. I never believed it for a second...until I saw that boy today."

For once, I saw an honest side to Miyagawa, stripped of the bluff and bluster. He was being vulnerable with me.

"I can't for the life of me think what he's been up to these past sixteen months. Let me ask you a question, Onishi: When was the last time you felt threatened by an unarmed man?"

"..."

In defiance of his supposed abstinence from smoking, Miyagawa put a cigarette to his mouth and lit it. I wanted to say, "*Don't be silly, he's just a kid,*" but something held me back.

Because I had felt it, too.

...A fear like the time my father and I had gone hunting in the mountains and had stared down a wounded bear.



After the detectives left, the doctor introduced himself as Koichi Maeno. We talked a little about what treatments were to follow, and then he sent me to a hospital room. A nurse guided me there, then quickly departed, leaving Mai and me to ourselves.

“...I can’t believe I have to repeat a year,” I said.

I couldn’t think of where else to begin. I’d lost over a year’s worth of memories, all my friends had been turned to light and spirited away by magic, and I was the only person to have come back.

“A year... A whole year... It’s a long time.”

It hadn’t really felt like I’d been gone all that long, but now the reality of the situation was starting to sink in.

“...Mai. Is what that detective said true? Are Kenta and Suehiko really gone?”

I was still expecting her to come clean at any moment and explain how the whole thing was some elaborate prank. But Mai’s eyes drooped—so imperceptibly that only someone in the family could have noticed—and she shook her head.

“...Out of all your friends, dear brother, the only one who didn’t go missing is Yuuto.”

“H-he’s still around?!”

“The police were conducting an open investigation, and they showed me the list of names of the people who disappeared.”

Mai reached into her bag and pulled out her phone, swiping across the screen with a slender forefinger.

“Look at this,” she said, handing it to me. She’d pulled up the front page of the police website. Beneath a banner asking for witnesses was a list of names that scrolled across the bottom of the screen, and on it I found the names of my two friends, Suehiko Ito and Kenta Kido. In fact, most of my classmates were there as well.

“How...? This can’t...”

A meaningless, instinctive refusal issued from my lips. I had never expected that text on a screen could make me feel such dread. The detective’s words sounded once more in my head. The key to finding them was hidden somewhere in the void of my memories.

What happened? And why don’t I remember any of it? Dammit, what do I do?

Whenever I tried to remember anything, it was as though I were trapped in a deep swamp. The loss and impatience fanned the flames of my fear and caused my blood to race.

“...You should sleep, dear brother. I can’t stand you looking as downtrodden as a filthy sewer rat any longer.”

While turning on the waterworks, my clever little sister shrewdly slipped her phone out of my hand. She’d acted the same way I remembered her, out of concern for me, yet I couldn’t help realizing just how much she’d grown.

Time had marched on without me. My forgetting it didn’t mean it hadn’t happened.

Somewhere inside me, within the deepest recesses of my heart...

“...Rgh!”

It hurt.

A pounding headache, like a fire trying to burn its way through my skin and bones.

“Just get some sleep, dear brother. I wouldn’t want your unappealing face to grow any wearier, or else nobody will be able to love you except me.”

“You’re right, Mai. Thanks. Sorry for worrying you.”

As soon as she mentioned fatigue, I felt tiredness assail me. It was still early evening, but I couldn’t stave off sleep any longer. I could think about my predicament later.

So I lay down in bed, and Mai gently pulled the covers over me. You know, it wasn’t all bad being sick every once in a while. At least I had my sister to look after me. I’d tell her I could feel the love, except she might twist my ear off.

“...It’s my job to fix you, useless brother. You just rest easy now...”

“Huh? Mai...?”

My sister closed her lips again without explaining what she meant. It preyed on my mind, but I was powerless against the warm blankets, so I quickly closed my eyes.



"It's my fault...*sob*. It's all my fault."

In a corner of the room, there was a crying child.

No, not just any child. It was me.

"I'm sorry. I'm so, so, sorry..."

An old dream. A bitter memory of events long ago, now scorched into my mind.

Mom and Dad were out of the house and had left me, a new elementary-schooler, alone with Mai. She was often sick and rarely left the house, and she had been confined to bed with a fever that morning.

"Can I do anything for you, Mai? I know, I'll read you a book if you like."

"I don't want book. I want to hold hands."

"Well, okay. I can do that."

As I took her clammy palms, I remember she looked lost in the clouds.

"Your hands... So warm..."

"Do you need anything else?"

"Nu-uh... Just stay with me... I don't wanna be alone..."

"Okay, sure. Then I'll stay right here."

Rendered weak by her cold, Mai seemed much meeker than usual. I held her hand, and she gradually drifted off to sleep. I always found it cute the way she couldn't stand being alone. Mom and Dad would usually take care of her when she fell ill, but they weren't here right now.

There was only me. I felt proud, grown-up. My bratty little sister was being nice to me for the first time in my life. It felt good. Right now, I was the only person she could rely on. I didn't want anyone to take my newfound strength away from me.

And that was where my mistakes began. I immediately forgot the most important thing.

Because I stood up and left my sister alone. I went down the street, coins in hand, to buy my sister a tub of her favorite apple jelly from the convenience store. *She'll love to have some when she wakes up*, I thought.

But in doing so, I broke my promise. I'd decided that was what Mai wanted without asking her and left her all alone by herself. No sooner had I spoken the words "*I'll stay right here*" than I went back on them.

When Mai woke up, she left the house to go looking for me and was hit by a car.

"Oh God, please. Please don't let her die..."

I watched the ambulance take her away, as if into a dark crevasse from which she would never return. The house I returned to alone had never felt so cold.

I was her big brother. How could I ever have made her feel that way? I was pathetic.

I tucked in my knees and shivered, as though packing myself away into a tiny little box.



"Mmh... Mmm... Ah..."

I awoke feeling worse than I had before I'd gone to sleep. I wasn't tired, but the bad aftertaste of the dream clung to me.

"It's nighttime already... Damn, my sleep schedule is so messed up."

I must have been even more exhausted than I thought. According to the illuminated clockface, it was already past eight PM. The only thing I could hear was the regular beeping of the hospital equipment. It felt like I was the last man on the planet.

The cold stillness reminded me of my childhood home, where I'd waited alone for Mai to come back. Come to think of it, it was this very hospital that she'd been taken to.

Perhaps that was why I'd had that dream.

On my bedside table, I found a note that read, "See you tomorrow, dear

brother. I'll bring a fresh change of clothes. Make sure to chew slowly when you eat and wait quietly in your bed like a dead fish." It was full of my sister's characteristic bitterness.

"...I'm thirsty."

Upon realizing this, I also noticed just how hungry I was. *Do they not bring patients meals in places like this?* I wondered. Mai had mentioned food in her note, but perhaps they'd already taken my dinner away, since I was asleep.

"...I don't think it's important enough to ring the bell for a nurse," I thought aloud. "I'll live. I'll just go and see if they have a snack bar or something."

It was then that I realized I had no money. I searched the desk nearby, but my phone and wallet were nowhere to be found.

"Urgh... Well, I have to eat something."

Somehow, the realization that I couldn't procure any food made me feel even hungrier. I stayed there worrying about what to do for a while before heaving a deep sigh and exiting the room. All I could do was track down a nurse and see if they would bring me anything to eat.

The only people in the hall outside seemed to be other patients. The layout was exactly the same as when Mai had been hospitalized here. Following a vague recollection from a lifetime ago, I went down the halls in search of some kind of floor plan.

But then, just as I was rounding a corner, I heard a voice.

"Oh, but isn't it awful about that boy on the third floor? He was involved in that disappearance last year, I heard."

"Oh, him. It's such a shame what happened to him, but I can't help feeling scared, too, you know? They say it wasn't his fault, but still..."

Disappearance? Are they talking about me? I thought.

"But this'll be good for his sister as well. She's had no one to rely on ever since it happened, you know."

Hmm? No one to rely on...?

A discomforting chill ran down my spine, as though I knew what was coming. A terrible emotion crept into my heart.

I knew I was going to regret hearing whatever came next, but I couldn't bring myself to run away.

"She's so mature for her age, but at the end of the day she's still a sixteen-year-old."

"Yes, and even though she got that insurance payout, money can't buy back her family, can it?"

"It must have been so hard for her after her parents passed. And with her aunt and grandmother missing, too..."

I felt a *click*, like I'd just been locked in that cold room, waiting for Mai.

Mom and Dad...were dead?

Auntie and Grandma...were missing?

What...the hell? What the hell what the hell what the hell?

"N...no. It can't be..."

But now that I thought about it, some things just didn't add up otherwise. The first person who came to my room was Mai. Mom and Dad hadn't shown up, even when people had started explaining things later.

I'm not being bigheaded or anything, but I knew Mom and Dad, and they would have come running as soon as they heard the news, just like Mai had. And if they couldn't, they'd have tried calling me, at the very least.

But...what if they were...?

"...Dead? Mom and Dad are really dead...?"

The moment those words left my mouth, it was like I was already completely convinced.

"Auntie and Grandma are gone, too?"

Mom's mother was the last grandparent I had. She lived in a retirement home somewhere. The only other living relative who could possibly support us would have been my aunt. If both of them had disappeared, then...

...What about Mai? Who was taking care of her? Who had been looking after her all this time?

“That’s... I can’t...”

My eyes started to spin. My chest grew tight, and I found it difficult to breathe. My pulse hastened, and my ears began to ring.

“I have to go... I have to go see her right now!”

I had to see Mai while I still could. I had to speak to her as soon as possible!

“Grh!!”

Gripped by an uncertain fear, I took one step back, then another, and bolted down the hallway, silently searching for a way out. The front entrance was already locked. Attempting to steady my runaway heart, I looked around for a back door.

The security guard there let out a huge yawn, but it was simple enough to conceal my presence from him as I gently slipped into the night. However, the sight that greeted me at the main road was that of an unfamiliar part of town.

The lights of the shops and houses blotted out the night, and the streets were filled with people. As the cool night air went to my head, I realized I didn’t know the way home.

“Dammit...!”

Still, the hospital couldn’t be far from where I lived, and I knew the general area. If I just walked down the main road, I’d soon come across something I recognized.

As I was contemplating this, I heard someone call out to me.

“...H-hey!! Wait up!!”

I turned in the direction of the voice to find a bespectacled woman running up to me.

“*Phew*, you’re a fast one, I’ll give you that. Let me catch my breath.”

She wore a coat, had a square black bag slung over her shoulder, and looked to be in her late twenties. As she huffed, her breath came out white in the cold.

“*Haah...* That’s better. Now, you must be Kaito, right? Kaito Ukei?”

“Yes? What of it?”

“I knew it! I knew it was worth waiting here for you!!”

The woman fist-pumped with a pleasant, sociable smile. I didn’t have the faintest idea who she was. How did she know my name? In any case, she either ignored or failed to notice my suspicious gaze.

“My name’s Kumiko Kawakami, and I’m a reporter for a magazine called *Utopia Monthly*,” she explained. “I was wondering if you might have some time to chat?”

“Sorry, I’m in a hurry. See you.”

“That’s great, then how about that restaurant over—? Huh?”

I turned and walked away from the reporter without another word, but she ran around in front of me.

“H-hey, wait!! Please! Just ten minutes of your time! No, five!”

“There’s somewhere I have to be,” I replied. “Leave me alone.”

“I’m not giving up that easily! From the look of you, I’d say you just escaped from the hospital, right? I bet I could call them up and get them to take you back into custody. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

You’d call the hospital? Stop me from seeing Mai?

As soon as the words sank in, I was overcome by an indescribable darkness that oozed from the very depths of my heart.

“Get out of my way get out of my way get out of my way! I have something to do, so make yourself scarce!”

“Fine,” I said. “If you won’t get out of my way, then...”

I’ll kill you.

“Eep?!”

“Ah...”

Her frightened squeal immediately quenched the pitch-black flame. A

darkness I had never felt before.

What was that just now? That was no joke, no empty threat. It was like all the blood in my veins had been replaced with something else. For a brief moment, I had genuinely wanted to kill her. To put my hands around her throat. To smash her head into the concrete.

What was I thinking? How could I even have contemplated something so... barbaric?

I never said it aloud, but I felt the weight of the words nonetheless. I knew through and through that I wasn't capable of murder. And yet at that moment, I was overcome by an urge to take her life. Like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean to threaten you," she said. "It's just...well, I've been waiting here all week, you see. I guess I just got a little overenthusiastic..."

For better or worse, my confusion over the emotions that had suddenly burst from me had cooled my head a little.

"N-no, it's my fault. But I'm sorry, I need to go."

"Er...sorry to pry, but is it somewhere nearby you're after? I just worry that if you run around the city like that, you'll get arrested."

"Well..."

Now that she mentioned it, the passersby were staring at me and my white hospital gown, especially now that I was arguing with another pedestrian. For the first time, I realized how reckless it had been to break out of the hospital without a plan.

"...Hmm. Seems like you're not going to talk. Well, I don't want to make any more of a fuss, and besides, you're a little scary right now..."

Muttering something under her breath, the woman heaved a resigned sigh.

"Fine, I'll call a cab if there's somewhere you need to go. Don't worry, I'll cover the fare. I doubt you have any money on you anyway."

"What? But why?"

I was taken aback by her abrupt cooperativeness. But Ms. Kawakami simply reached out and hailed a taxi. Then she handed me a business card with her number scrawled on the back.

“In exchange, I’d like you to get in touch with me whenever you feel up for it. We’ll have a nice chat then, okay?”

There was an aura behind her pleasant smile that made it surprisingly difficult to argue against.

“Here’s the money. You’d better pay me back, you hear? I collect my debts. You can be sure of that. Now go on. Didn’t you say you were in a hurry?”

Then she ushered me into the taxi and placed some bills into my hand.

“...Thank...thank you.”

“No need. I’m hoping your story will make all that back and then some.”

Giving me a wave, she slammed the door shut.

“Where to, sir?”

I gave the driver my home address, and the cab pulled out into the road.

I looked out the window. If memory served me correctly, it wasn’t far to my house by car. As I watched the strange streets go by, they gradually gave way to more familiar ones.

It was my old neighborhood, and yet something was different. The churning in my stomach refused to back down.

Mai was all alone in that house again.

I can’t leave her alone... I just can’t...

Being alone is awful. It makes everything seem so dark that you can’t tell what’s what anymore. It starts to feel like you’re at the bottom of a deep ocean, surrounded by foes on all sides.

That’s why I kept running and running, trying not to look at it, trying to find somewhere I could breathe free of that dark water...

“...Hmm? What...what am I talking about?”

My head ached. Now that I had calmed down, I started to notice the inconsistency in my emotions. Something wasn't right. Something about it just didn't make sense.

I was worried about Mai, that much was true. But why was I so...?

"Sir, we're nearly there now."

"Oh, ah. This is close enough, thank you."

I still wasn't thinking straight by the time I arrived at my front door. A small house on the side of a hill. In its modest yard were the beautiful potted herbs my mother had tended. And in the garage, without a speck of dust, was the motorbike my father had painstakingly cared for.

I felt nostalgic, even though I had been here only yesterday, from my point of view. Perhaps even though the memories were gone, the yearslong distance still remained.

I never thought I would be moved to tears by the sight of my own home. Still, right now the important thing was Mai.

"..."

I slipped the spare key out from underneath the garden plant pot and entered through the front door. As soon as I stepped into the entryway and removed my shoes, I felt calmer. At the far end of the hallway, light was leaking out from a door that was slightly ajar. Mai must be in there.

I didn't know what I was going to say to her, but I began walking softly down the hall.

"...That's what I think. He's been gone so long, after all."

I noticed a shrine to our parents, accompanied by a photograph of them smiling blankly, along with the cloying scent of incense.

"He says he's forgotten everything that happened. I know he's always been a birdbrain, but this is ridiculous. Still...I'm glad he hasn't changed. He's the same old big brother I remember, and I hope he always stays that way."

Mai kneeled before the shrine with her back to me, hands pressed together, talking to the air without noticing my presence.

“He was hurt so badly that he was unconscious for ten days. I finally got to see my family again, but I was still alone... You’re all so mean. Where did you go off to without me? Why did you leave your precious Mai behind?”

I heard her voice quaver. Was she crying?

“I’ve been so lonely...all this time. Please come back...Mom, Dad...”

I couldn’t just stand there any longer.

“Mai!!”

“What?! Who’s—?!”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I left you by yourself, and I don’t even remember why...”

I walked over to Mai and hugged her from behind. Right now, I didn’t care about how strange I was acting. I didn’t care about the dark emotions whose origins I couldn’t trace. At this moment, none of that mattered.

“K-Kaito?! How did you...?! Ah, wait, you’ve got it all wrong, Mom and Dad are, um...”

“It’s okay. It’s okay...”

I held her tightly, so tightly, as if making up for everything I’d lost.

So that nobody could take her away from me as well.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t there for you. Some brother I am.”

“...But you came back. You came back, dear brother. Once you get out of the hospital, I’ll take care of you, and you can help around the house. It’ll be just like before...”

“Yes,” I said. “I’ll be with you. I’ll always be with you... No matter what happens, I’m never going to leave you behind again.”

I wasn’t going to lose her again. I couldn’t afford to lose her again.

Yes, that was all I wished for. All I needed...

“...Grh. Not this again...”

“Kaito...?”

My head started pounding. An emotion wormed its way out of the deepest

recesses of my mind. From a fathomless dark hole, to bind me. Something I didn't understand.



I... I...

“...”

I said nothing. I just hugged Mai even tighter, ignoring that perpetual flame, sealing off those emotions that threatened to break free even now.

This was the only thing I needed, wasn't it? Then why couldn't I say it?



“Yes, everything seems to be in order. You can put your shirt back on.”

After prodding me with his stethoscope, the doctor put it back around his neck.

“At least you don't seem to be suffering from hypothermia. You gave us all quite a scare, you know. The nights can be dreadfully chilly around this time of year.”

“Ah-ha-ha... Sorry about that...”

I gave a nervous grin, before bowing in sincere apology. As deeply as I could.

We'd gotten a phone call at home after I'd escaped the hospital the night before. A patrolling nurse had noticed my absence and raised the alarm. Then after searching the grounds and finding no signs of me, they called my house. When I picked up and heard a panicked voice asking, “*I'm terribly sorry, but has Kaito turned up there?*” I'd felt so awkward, I considered hanging up on the spot.

But of course, that wasn't going to solve anything, so I admitted to running away and went straight back to the hospital to prostrate myself at the feet of the staff. It was quite late at night by then, so I'd considered staying at home and returning the next morning, but I wasn't sure they would be amenable to that.

You see, I learned something very important that night. Grown-ups can be terrifying when they're angry.

“Swear to me, you'll never do something so silly ever again!! Please stay right here for the next two days, I implore you!”

“Yes...I will. I shouldn’t have done that...”

“...As long as you understand. I won’t say anything more. I hope you realize that I’m not trying to scare you, but you were seriously injured when you were brought in. The wounds could still be adversely affecting you. You need to stay in bed.”

“...I’ll stay put and reflect on what I’ve done.”

I couldn’t bear being told off like this.

I bowed again as the doctor departed, leaving me alone in the hospital room.

“*Haah...* Two more days, huh? That’s depressing...”

I curled up on my bed and rolled from side to side. If I didn’t do silly things like this when I was alone, the weight of everything that had happened would crush me.

Mai and I had spoken at length before the people from the hospital came to pick me up.

She told me that Mom and Dad had driven their car off a cliff into the sea the same day I went missing. Apparently, the ocean waves carried the wreckage away, so their bodies were never found. As for Auntie and Grandma, they’d simply disappeared without a trace. Mai was living off inheritances and life insurance at the moment, so she didn’t have to earn a living. The only bright side—if you could call it that—was that there weren’t any fights over wills or anything like that, since our extended family was small.

That was the only saving grace I could salvage from all this.

“...”

Alone in the hospital, I felt utterly powerless, and my idle thoughts turned to the future. A future whose weight was stifling. How was I ever going to support my sister without the love of our parents I had taken for granted for so long?

If Mai knew what I was thinking, she’d probably say, “*It’s okay, dear brother. I’ll take care of you. Like a cute, pathetic little piglet.*”

As impossible as it sounded for me to look after her, the reverse was even worse.

“I need to get it together.”

Mai had offered to take the day off from school to be with me, but I’d refused. I needed time to put my thoughts in order, and this was the only chance I was likely to get.



“Kaito!!”

“Wh-wha—?! I wasn’t asleep, I wasn’t asleep!!”

I shot upright as the door to my room burst open. There was little entertainment around here, so I had drifted off out of sheer boredom. I couldn’t even walk around the hospital after what had happened last time. Not because I wasn’t allowed to, but because I couldn’t handle the doctors and nurses all staring at me, like, *Planning another escape, are we?*

So I had spent my time watching reruns of old TV shows, but now my drowsiness had been completely excised.

“Is that you, Yuuto?! Hey, hey, don’t cry, you’ll ruin your good looks...except damn, you’re still as handsome as ever. How the hell do you do that?”

“Ah-ha-ha... It is you, Kaito. It’s really you...”

It was one of my best friends from school, Yuuto Kanazaki. Even the tears in his eyes did nothing to detract from his frustratingly suave features.

“Who else would I be? *Guph?!?*”

“You idiot! Where the hell did you disappear to?!”

“Ow! You punched me!” I yelled back, rubbing my wounded stomach. “Is that any way to treat a guy in the hospital?!”

“Shut up. Do you have any idea how hard this last year has been? A few jabs is the least I’m owed!”

“Ow! Stop it! Guh!”

Just as I attempted to get out of bed, Yuuto caught me in the neck with some lariat-like maneuver, before transitioning to a choke hold.

“Mai’s been worried sick about you, you know. I thought you were supposed

to be obsessed with her. So why are you letting her cry?”

“Yuuto...”

“Oh, Kaito. I’m so glad you’re back, I really am.”

“...Uhh... My dear Yuuto, dry your pathetic tears. I shall grant you a second chance.”

“Kaaaitooo!!”

“Ah, wait, Yuuto, stop, it was just a joke, please!”

I tapped his arm in submission until he mercifully released me.

“*Phew*, free at last. Actually, why are you even here? Don’t you have school?”

“Your sister texted me this morning to say you’d woken up. I came running as soon as I heard.”

“She texted you? ...Yuuto, don’t tell me you’ve laid your wandering hands on Mai while I’ve been away. While I am loath to commit violence, I have a duty to uphold as her brother. A duty that involves keeping her away from scumbags like you.”

“Aha! That got a rise out of you, didn’t it? Getting protective? I think your sister obsession is getting worse, Kaito.”

“Oh, shut it.”

Honestly, though, I was starting to see his point. There was what happened yesterday as well, but I could do without Yuuto poking his nose into that.

“You have nothing to fear, Kaito. Shiori’s the only one for me, and you know that. I wouldn’t dream of making a move on Mai.”

“Yuuto... I...”

The pain hidden behind my friend’s jolly smile was plain to see. And it wasn’t hard for me to guess the cause.

“Ah, right,” said Yuuto. “I guess you’ve already seen the list of people who went missing that day.”

“Shiori... She disappeared, didn’t she?”

Yuuto's significant other was a lovely girl by the name of Shiori Akikawa, who was in the year above us at school. Yuuto had been friends with her all his life, from before we'd met, and Kenta, Suehiko, and I had set the stage for him to first tell her how he felt back in middle school.

Unbeknownst to anyone else, Shiori and I were also members of the Little Sister Lovers League. It was indescribably heart-wrenching to see her name on the list of victims the previous day.

"Hey, Kaito. Mai tells me you don't remember a thing since the disappearances. In that case, how much do you remember about the day itself?"

"You mean...the day everyone went missing?"

"Yeah."

"All I remember is, I was chatting with Kenta and Suehiko. You'd just gone upstairs to speak to Shiori, and we were making bets on how long you'd be up there."

"...Ha-ha. So that's what you three were like behind my back." Yuuto closed his eyes in peaceful reminiscence. "What happened next?"

"...Well, I heard about it, but to be honest, I can't recall much myself."

"Really...? I see. I remember it perfectly. Everything went bright, and a magic circle appeared out of nowhere around Shiori. I'll never forget the look of shock on her face as she dissolved into particles of light."

The fact that Yuuto could keep his voice from breaking as he recounted the tragic tale was testament to his growth over the past year. I had nothing like that.

"I'm sorry, Kaito. I know this is a terrible thing to ask... When they first brought you in ten days ago, you were wrapped in bandages from head to toe. I could tell something terrible must have happened. Something you wanted to forget."

Yuuto bowed his head apologetically.

"But I have to ask, Kaito. I need you to remember what happened. No matter

how bad it is. I need to hear something about Kenta, about Suehiko, about Shiori. Even if it's just a scrap..."

"...It's okay. I understand," I replied. "I don't want to stay an amnesiac forever. As far as I'm concerned, this bomb can't go off soon enough."

"Kaito... I'm sorry."

"I told you that you don't have to apologize. It's just...it doesn't seem like my memories are going to come back anytime soon."

Of course, I wanted to regain my lost experiences as quickly as possible. But the past day had given me a lot of time to think, and I still wasn't any closer. Whenever I tried to remember anything, I came up blank, as though there was a big hole in my head. Every thread I followed had been cut short.

"I've tried as hard as I can, but I can't recall anything. I'm sorry."

"Oh. Well, maybe I put too much pressure on you," he said, shaking his head. "If you can't remember, you can't remember."

The truth was, I felt guilty. Because there was a part of me that wondered if I should remember at all. I wasn't lying when I said I wanted my memories back, but at the same time, I was frightened of what might rear out of that deep, dark pit in my brain. What if it grabbed me and pulled me back into an abyss from which there was no escape?

An awkward silence followed, filled by the sound of the TV in my room.

"Hello, and it's time for Pickup News. Today we have with us Dr. Kuroi, an expert in the field of criminal psychology."

At some point, the soap opera I had been watching had ended. Now there was a news show on TV, featuring a presenter I didn't recognize sitting alongside a middle-aged man with a tragically balding head. Just as I picked up the remote to switch it off, something caught my attention.

"This month has seen another brutal crime perpetrated by an alleged Rebirther."

"...Rebirther?"

For some reason, my stomach churned when I heard the word.

“Rebirthers, yeah. They’re all a bunch of psychos.”

“Yuuto?”

He wasn’t even trying to conceal his disgust. I’d never seen him so filled with loathing. As I paused, wondering if I should ask about it, the conversation on TV continued.

“Is there any way to stop these tragedies? Let’s ask the experts with us today. Dr. Kuroi, let’s hear from you. What does a man of your position make of all this?”

“Well, after the stabbing six months ago, the Rebirthers mostly stuck to petty theft and vandalism. The police decided to crack down on their activities after a spate of embarrassing displays of incompetence, such as the leaks last year.”

“Part of that was the government’s decision to keep Fujinomiya Institute for Secondary Education open and running, right?”

“Yes. Well, there wasn’t much else they could do. The Rebirthers came after anyone who used to work or study at the school, even if they moved out of the city. But with the school’s extra security, plus the increased awareness among students and staff, it became quite difficult for the Rebirthers to act. So they waited half a year for the heat to die down. What you need to understand about these people is that they aren’t concerned with consequences. They aren’t just lawbreakers; they are believers of a dangerous fantasy.”

“A dangerous fantasy?”

“That’s right. Just like with the rise of Christianity in the fifteenth century, these people believe that death will deliver them their eternal reward. That is precisely why the perpetrators have committed suicide before their capture. With the threat of capital punishment rendered meaningless, it is very difficult to prevent these crimes.”

“I see. You’re saying they don’t mind dying to achieve their goal of reincarnating into a fantasy world.”

“Well, who can say if that’s really where they end up,” replied the criminal psychologist, with a wry smile.

I asked Yuuto to explain what I'd just seen, and he closed his eyes and thought for a moment.

"...Well, I suppose you'll be at risk if nobody tells you."

With that unsettling introduction, Yuuto launched into his explanation.

"A lot's happened since you and the others went missing. It was all over the news, but the police investigation turned up nothing. The school closed down for a bit, and some students and teachers started to move away during that time. The second-years lost three classes worth of students, and the first-and third-years lost one class each. It's no wonder they were talking about shutting down the school. That's when a video of the incident one of the students took got uploaded to the internet. The video went viral...and a lot of people died."

Yuuto made a face like he'd swallowed a bug.

"People died? Back up. How did that happen?" I asked, incredulous at the notion that a mere video could lead to people's deaths.

"Well, these guys are nuts, that's why. Hold up, I'm sure I can find it if I look..."

Yuuto took out a decent-size tablet PC and brought up a video. Handing the tablet over to me, he picked up the TV remote and turned down the volume.

"...All right, ready to go."

The video opened on an ordinary third-year classroom. The students, none of whom I could put names to, had just set up a bunch of erasers like dominoes.

"Whaddaya think, wanna bet? Will it work or not?"

"All right, I bet my lunch it'll never reach the end."

"Well, that won't work. We gotta bet different things."

"You two! Have a little faith, will you?"

The video seemed to have been taken on a phone, and although the quality wasn't great, it was pretty easy to get an idea of the mood.

However, the jovial pre-class atmosphere didn't last long.

It began without warning.

“Oh, I know. Get up on a chair and catch a view from above.”

“All right, but make sure it makes it halfway, at least.”

“Just you watch. All right, ready to— Whoa, what’s that?!”

“Whoa?!”

Just as the person recording climbed onto a chair, the screen filled with a blinding light. I heard the clatter of the chair as he fell to the floor.

“Ow... Wh-what? What happened?”

He stood up and panned the camera around to reveal that a pair of magic circles had surrounded his two friends.

“Eek! What’s happening?!”

“What’s this? A wall?!”

“Hey, is this some kinda prank? I’m trying to study.”

“Huh? What’s going on? I can’t get out!!”

Chaos gripped the classroom. Only about ten students from the class had been trapped, but I could see other people in the hallway stuck within similar rings of light at the edge of the frame. If you ignored the frantic pounding against the invisible walls by students both within and without the circles, it looked just like some sort of weird performance art.

But then the strangeness took a frightening turn.

It was a girl at the back of the classroom who noticed it first.

“EEEEEEK! My...my hand?!”

The video shakily turned in her direction.

What happened next was like a scene out of a cheap science-fiction movie. The tips of the girl’s fingers started dissolving into particles of pale blue light, which worked its way up her arm.

As soon as one person noticed it, others did, too.

“N-no way. Wh-what’s happening? What’s happening?!”

“No! Nooo!!”

“My hands! My legs! Somebody, help me!”

“No, no... It’s cold. What’s happening? I’m disappearing...”

Gradually, the astonishment transformed into dread. The boy who’d set up the dominoes turned to light, along with all the other students.

“Wh-what the hell, man...? Am I dreaming?”

The microphone picked up the stunned words of the person taking the video.

Less than a minute had passed since it began, and yet all that remained of the domino engineer was his head. Even the grainy video could not fail to pick up the look of sheer terror on his face as he panicked and screamed for help.

Soon, every last one of the trapped students was gone, and the person recording pointed his camera downward, at an empty ring of light that had failed to capture anyone. As if on cue, it cracked like a china plate, and both it and the wall of light surrounding it disappeared.

At last, the fantastical sight came to an end, and silence descended upon the classroom, leaving nothing in the place of the missing students but a lonely void.

“...Ah, I’d better stop the video.”

The recording then abruptly switched to a front-facing view, presumably by accident. I saw the shocked face of the student right before the video cut off.

“That wasn’t edited...was it?”

Somehow, I knew. The video wasn’t fake. I felt sick, nauseated. The world spun, and my ears rang.

I’d seen it. I’d seen it before. I knew I had. But where? And why did it feel so painful to watch?

And what was the icy sensation trying to crawl out of the hole in my mind?

I took deep breaths and tried to focus on Yuuto’s voice. Anything to distract myself from whatever this was.

“At first, everyone thought it was fake, just like you did. But there was no other way to explain it, and even VFX experts started weighing in, saying it was

real... Of course, I already knew that, because I'd seen it with my own two eyes. Shiori disappeared just like this as well. I see her face at night sometimes. It makes me wish I'd lost my mind."

Yuuto's sardonic words rang hollow in my ears.

"Sorry, I went off the rails a bit there," he said at last. "Anyway, right after this video went online, it was everywhere. The whole country was made aware of it. And while everyone was talking about how fake it looked, there was one theory that kept cropping up."

"What was that?"

"Something stupid. A conspiracy theory, basically. People started saying that the magic circles were summoning people to another world."

For some reason, my heart leaped in my chest. Something deep inside me called out, *"No! That's wrong!"*

Damn, why the hell do I feel like this?

I could feel the blood racing through my veins, and my vision blurred. I tried to keep it under control, acting like nothing was wrong as Yuuto carried on speaking.

"That wasn't so bad by itself," he said. "I mean, obviously *something* supernatural happened that day, whether it was an alternate dimension or not. Either that, or we all lost our minds at the exact same time. The problem was what happened next."

"Why, what happened next?"

"Those same people started saying it was possible to go to this world yourself. All you had to do was level up by killing someone who had been present when the summoning happened."

"Wh-what?"

That seemed like a huge leap in logic. I wasn't sure I'd heard Yuuto correctly at first.

"Exactly. Sounds crazy, doesn't it? But a lot of people believed it. They started converting people through the deep web, and it wasn't long before things

turned violent. Someone from school got called onto a TV show to talk about the incident, and one of the crew stabbed them to death.”

“ ...”

“Then the police announced the video was genuine, and right after that, the personal information of the students and staff got leaked. That was when things turned really bad.”

Yuuto paused to take a breath before resuming his story.

“People from our school were attacked across the country. They had their things stolen, because people thought they would get more reincarnation points if they had our personal belongings. There was no limit to what they would do. Some of us got hurt or even kidnapped. Our personal information was all out in the open, so nobody could stop them. Kaori went missing around that time, and nobody’s heard from her since.”

“Kaori? You mean Shiori’s little sister? But why? What did she have to do with it?!”

I still remembered the girl’s cheerful smile. She couldn’t have been older than ten. She was always asking us whether she or her sister was the cutest, and you would never see her without the little cat hairpin Shiori had given her. Her big sister was her idol.

“The Rebirthers assigned each of us a point score. Those of us who were at school when it happened were called the *Untargeted*, and we were supposedly worth a hundred points. Our siblings were worth seventy points, while our parents were worth fifty. Even things like our blood or hair could be worth between one and five points, depending on how much of it you could get. Hah! They’re like rats. True scum of the earth.”

“B-but what about the police? Why didn’t they do anything?”

“We filed a missing person report about Kaori, of course, but nothing happened. There’s no leads.”

“B...but they haven’t found a body, right? She could still be alive?”

“Yeah. We’ll find her one day. Kaori and Shiori both. I’m not going to give up,

no matter how long it takes. Don't worry, I'm still okay... I'm still okay."

I thought Yuuto was going to crack his teeth, the way he was grinding them. And I also thought I'd heard those words somewhere before. Behind his eyes, I saw deep, dark flames of burning anger, so ready to explode that they were like a balloon on the verge of popping.

I wasn't sure what to say. It was obvious that one more push could send my friend hurtling over the edge, so I kept my mouth shut.

"Anyway, that's what I meant when I said that people died because of that video. And the personal information that got leaked by the police, too. There were photos, addresses, enough to track someone down...or to murder them. Of course, the government and police finally started taking things seriously once people started dying. The local police department hired dozens more officers, and they decided to keep the school open. Easier to look after us when we're all in one place, I guess. With security beefed up like that, the attacks stopped for a while..."

Yuuto's gaze wandered to the TV. Oh yeah, there had just been another murder, hadn't there?

"Kaito," he said. "I know I don't need to tell you this, but look after Mai, won't you?"

"Of course I will. I'll protect her with my life. I won't let those bastards lay a finger on her."

"That's not what I mean. Besides, if they come after anyone, it'll be you. I mean mentally. Treat it like she'd kill herself if you died."

"Huh? I don't think so. Mai's made of tougher stuff than that."

"I know. But treat it like she would. If anything happened to you, Mai would be in pieces. You remember her friends?"

"You mean Yuuki and Satomi? Hold on, you're not saying..."

I still remembered the day Mai had brought those two over during middle school. My shy and antisocial little sister's very first friends.

"Yuuki went missing during the crime wave half a year ago. As for Satomi,

well...you saw what they said on TV. That was just this month.”

Why? Why?

Why did my little sister have to go through so much pain? What had she ever done to deserve it?

First our parents had died, then I’d gone missing, then she’d lost her friends.

I just didn’t get why it had to be her...

“You’re the only one she has left, Kaito.”

My head throbbed. This was like a sick joke. One that left me with the distinct feeling I’d heard it somewhere before.

Why was this pain all too familiar?

A few days after Yuuto came to visit, I was finally released from that prison called a hospital.

“Thank you,” I said to the staff as I left.

“Oh, no need. I’m just happy there were no complications in your treatment.”

It was the middle of a weekday morning, so nobody came to collect me. Only Dr. Maeno and the nurses were there to see me off.

Mai had offered to pick me up, adding that it would be a shame if I got lost and started crying, but I declined. It wouldn’t do for her to miss another day of school on my behalf. Then she tried offering again, this time saying she was worried the hospital staff wouldn’t be able to pry me out of bed in the morning. Then she asked if I was going to claim I’d forgotten something and go back to ogle the pretty nurses. Then she called me a pervert with a nurse fetish and said she was ashamed to be my little sister. And then...folks, I caved. I’m afraid I’ve never been able to hold out against her scornful gaze.

Each insult seemed worse than the last, and I could barely even hear what she was saying anymore by the end of her tirade. I knew she was talking, but I was busy nursing a wounded heart. *Sniffle.*

In fact, it was a miracle I had been able to get her to go to school at all, instead of coming to see me immediately.

Anyway, I ended up asking the staff to move my discharge forward so that I could get home early. Once I got home, I would call Mai and tell her there was no need to leave school. She would probably be angry that I tricked her, but I could always smooth that over with some apple jelly.

“I know things are rough in your life right now,” the doctor said, “but take care.”

“Thank you,” I replied. I changed into the regular clothes that Mai had brought me and packed all my things into a bag. Then, with one last deep bow, I left the hospital and was on my way. The sky was clear and blue, and I felt determination forming in my mind.

I had been given much to think about, and there were still things that worried me, but I was sure that I would have nothing to fear as long as I didn’t let my troubles get me down.

There was something else I had to protect before I could think about myself.

“All right then,” I said to myself. “It’s time to settle back into my regular routine.”

My memories were a year behind the world. I had a lot of catching up to do. So much had changed, and so much was the same. There was so much I knew, and so much I didn’t. I had to link it all up, make everything routine again.

I needed to stay by Mai. I needed to protect her. I needed to hold on tight. Nothing else mattered. I couldn’t lose her. Because if that ever happened to me again...

...Hold on. Again?

“Hey, where did we go wrong?”

“I’ll do anything and everything I can for you. I’ll give you half the world if I must.”

“So please, come to my side.”

“Huh?!”

I saw stars in the harsh light of the sun. Ahead of me was a redheaded girl, standing with her back to me.

But as soon as I reached out to her, my head stung, and she vanished.

“...I’m getting used to this.”

Deep inside me, something was clawing its way to the surface. It was the part of me I’d lost. I knew it. Somehow, I could feel it. Somewhere inside that vast hole was a fragment of myself, trying to make itself known.

It was all coming back. And that was good. I needed to remember. For Yuuto, for Mai, and for myself. But I couldn’t be happy.

Because there was something deeply terrifying about it.

The voice inside me was so angry, so distressed, that I could hardly believe it was my own.

My rational mind was telling me to remember. My past self was screaming at me to remember. But some part of me was afraid. Each time I got a glimpse, my fears came hurtling back. Was that really me? What terrible things had befallen me in those absent months?

“But that, just now... That was different.”

It wasn’t full of hate and anger like the other memories.

That memory was bittersweet. Joyous and loving at first...but tinged with the unmistakable sorrow of loss.

“Geez, me. What the hell did you get up to?”

I ruffled my hair as if to deny the embarrassing feelings I swore I’d just experienced. Besides, a vision of a girl accompanied by a feeling of sadness probably just meant I’d gotten dumped.

“...Aaargh! Come on, Kaito! Get it together!”

I stopped on the asphalt road and shook my head. Just then, I heard a voice.

“Hmm? What was eating you up just now?”

“Huh? Oh, er... Do I know you from somewhere?”

“Oh, come on, don’t tell me you forgot already. Kumiko Kawakami? Reporter for *Utopia Monthly*? Ringing any bells?”

Before me was a mature young woman with tied-up black hair, wearing a cardigan. She rifled frantically through her bag, pulling out the magazine in question and showing it to me in an attempt to jog my memory. Her behavior was so at odds with her stylish appearance that I was at a loss for words.

My mother had once told me about the transformative powers of makeup and hairstyling, but I'd never seen such a potent demonstration before.

"Oh, yeah, yeah. I remember you. Ms. Kawakami, right? Yeah, it's all coming back to me."

"...You need to learn how to lie, young man. *Some people* might be filled with murderous rage at an answer like that."

"No, I really do remember you. It's just, I wasn't myself the other night, and it was dark and...and you look totally different now. In fact, I still don't recognize you."

"Well, of course! There's a big difference between my last-day-of-a-grueling-stakeout look and my immaculately dressed ready-for-action look!"

Now she seemed almost happy that I hadn't recognized her. Frankly, it was downright embarrassing for a woman her age. Perhaps she should work on making herself pretty on the inside as well. Don't worry, don't worry, I didn't say that to her face.

"But that's not what I came for. I'm here to collect on our deal."

"Ah, well, it's been a long day for me. I was kinda hoping to just go home and rest, to be honest..."

"*Excuse* me?"

"...But on second thought, a nice chat sounds lovely. Where to?"

The sheer pressure of those two words, combined with her piercing gaze, cowed me into submission, and I forced a cheap smile.

"I suppose you haven't had lunch yet, have you? Let's find somewhere we can eat and chat. Oh, and take this?"

"What's this, a face mask?"

It was one of those white disposable ones you wore when you had a cold.

“Yep. Oh, and put these on, too. I can’t believe you’re walking around town with your face exposed. Are you crazy?”

“Wh-what?”

“Put them on already! Get a clue!”

In addition to the mask, Ms. Kawakami handed me a pair of sunglasses and a beanie hat. I put them on at her urging. The accessories made me look like a stereotypical stalker out of a comic book, or something along those lines.

“Didn’t anyone tell you about the Rebirthers?” she asked. “If those wackjobs find out who you are, they’ll suicide bomb you into next week.”

“...R-right. I’ll keep an eye out for that.”

I guessed this threat was more serious than I thought. I kept the disguise on as I accompanied Ms. Kawakami to a nearby eatery.

“Two hamburg steak set meals and two bottomless sodas, please.”

“Thank you, ma’am, that’ll just be a few minutes.”

The restaurant we picked was unexpectedly busy for this time of day.

“You really need to be more careful,” Ms. Kawakami said. “Things have gotten real dangerous in this country. You know how valuable you are to these people, right?”

“...Yes, of course. I’ll be careful.”

She was absolutely right. I couldn’t really contest that point.

“Still,” she went on, “I guess we can relax a little. Looks like there’s a guard on duty.”

Ms. Kawakami nodded in the direction of a tall but otherwise unremarkable man sitting near the entrance to the store.

“You mean...he’s there to keep an eye on me?”

And here I thought I was imagining it. I could have sworn I was being watched ever since I left the hospital. And he wasn’t the only one. Though I couldn’t see

them, I could feel the watchful gazes of other people on me. Fortunately, they felt protective, like they were looking not so much at me, but around me.

Hold on. What the hell am I saying? That I can sense their presence? Feel their auras? Who do I think I am, an anime character? Oh god, don't tell me the memory loss has made me regress to my edgelord phase. I never want to go through that again.

I shook my head, attempting to dispel these illogical suspicions that had been hounding me the past few days. Still, the fact remained that there was indeed a man sitting by the front door.

"Did I not tell you? When I was lying in wait outside the hospital for you, this old man took me down to the police station, and they made me swear a written oath not to write an article about you."

"...Well, what do you want me to do about it?" I asked, averting my eyes. It felt like she was drilling holes into my skull.

"Not even a simple interview. Not even if I redacted your name, they said. Even just the fact that someone came back is being kept a secret, apparently. *'What if someone got killed as a direct result of your article?'* they said. And it's true. I'm not going to have that on my conscience."

I sighed. "So then why did you call me here?"

"Just out of curiosity. I may not get an article out of it, but after all the work I did to track you down, I thought I might as well ask you some questions."

"Right...", I said, not really able to sympathize. "Fine, ask away. I hope it's worth the thirty thousand yen you spent."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha..."

Ms. Kawakami gave a nervous chuckle as I wondered what exactly she hoped to gain from questioning an amnesiac.



"Phew, what a day..."

Splloosh!

I hopped into the bathtub, spilling water onto the floor, and let my fatigue be washed away.

“A-amnesia? So...you mean...I did all that for nothing?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say ‘nothing.’ You did manage to upset the police.”

“Grrrr! I knew I should have gone to that mixer instead of wasting my time!”

After that exchange with Ms. Kawakami, I’d returned home as originally planned and gotten in touch with Mai. I had no desire to inform her of my early return over the phone, so instead I sent a brief text message containing only the facts.

My phone rang almost the instant after the message went through, and when I didn’t answer, Mai sent me a text that read, “Dear chicken. Wait on your knees in the entrance hall. We have lots and lots to talk about when I get back. ♡🎵”

And so it was that my darling sister returned home amid the blood-soaked skies of evening to enjoy a nice long session of having a go at me. She made me explain everything, which was when she heard about Ms. Kawakami.

In that moment, her gaze could have frozen the oceans. She attacked me with wave after wave of stinging insults, such as *“It looks like my idiot brother only thinks with his crotch,”* and *“Perhaps you should learn how to treat a lady before you think about anything else,”* and *“I suppose it falls on this perfect little sister to educate her useless big brother before he assaults a woman on the street.”* If I hadn’t been waiting at the door with a container of the apple jelly of repentance in my hands like she’d asked, she would have been at it until morning.

“Back to school tomorrow, I guess... Can’t believe I’m going to be in Mai’s year now...and Yuuto’s in the year above.”

I changed into my pajamas and made my way back to the living room, where Mai was sitting on the sofa, watching TV.

“Ah, did you enjoy your bath, dear brother? Oh, you must remember to dry your hair completely. You’ll catch a cold, you know.”

“Lay off it, I’m not a kid. Anyway, I came to let you know the bath is free.”

“Ah, perfect. I’ll go and take a dip myself. Unless, that is, you have fouled the water with your putrescence?”

“Please give me a break, dear sister of mine. I don’t know how much more of this I can take.”

“Hmph. Well, you only have yourself to blame for that,” said Mai, snootily turning away and pouting like a child.

Oh my god, she’s too adorable. How can she be so cute?

I watched her leave for the bathroom, then went over to the fridge to get myself a can of soda. When I got back, I turned on the TV out of boredom and saw they were running one of those true crime shows. You know, the ones where they sit a bunch of comedians, celebrities, and criminal psychologists around a table and give them a video to react to.

Looks like it’s about those Rebirther guys...

“...So you’re saying the suspects might not have committed suicide?”

“I’m just saying, what kind of madman slits their own throat? How do people usually commit suicide? It’s hanging, falling, or self-immolation. Why would they go out of their way to choose a method that’s only going to cause them more pain?”

“Maybe that means it was the girl’s last attempt at fighting back? Oh god, that’s scary to think about.”

“But didn’t they say the guy was on drugs? He must have been a real nutjob.”

“Either way, it’s a troubling case. We can only hope that Satomi Saito can find peace in the next—”

I switched off the TV.

“...Guess I’ll head to bed.”

I’d already finished the contents of the can, so I left the living room and went out into the hallway.

“I’m gonna hit the hay,” I called out to Mai, and after hearing “Okaaay,” I

headed up the stairs to my bedroom.

Despite having lain empty for over a year, the room was exactly how I remembered it. I noticed the plants my mother had grown, and the bicycle my father used to like fixing. Mai had taken care of everything in my absence.

“ ... ”

I slipped under the covers and turned out the light, closed my eyes, and relaxed.

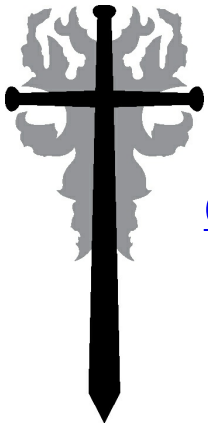
Then I started searching for the fragments of my lost memories. I had started doing this a few days ago, just before I drifted off.

I plunged deep into the swamp of my own mind, knowing a critical recollection awaited me at its bottom. Something I couldn't afford to forget. But no matter how much I tried, the memories would never come, and the tendrils of sleep would ensnare me and tear my consciousness away before long. Tonight, however, something happened just before the sandman came.

“...Huh? Mai...?”

“ ... ”

As I was drifting into slumber, I felt a little tug on the back of my pajamas, and smelled shampoo a little pricier than my own. I tried to peer over my shoulder, but it was impossible to check without moving my whole body, so I gave up. I said nothing to Mai, who had somehow sneaked into my bed without me noticing, and closed my eyes once more.



CHAPTER 2

Those Left Behind

Aaall right, Minnalis, Shuria. It's time to wake up; we don't have much time."

"Hmm...hmm?"

"Ah...uh?"

From far off, I heard someone calling our names. Then we felt the splash of cold water on our faces, like ice running down our nerves.

"...Wh...where am I?" I muttered, opening my eyes and coming face-to-face with Shuria. We were both laid out on the floor, facing each other.

I sat up and looked around, but the place we were in defied explanation. It was like a dream. The four walls, ceiling, and floor were all a spotless, milky white. I was fully awake by now, but my mind still felt hazy.

Before me was a woman in her mid-twenties, everything about her white: her hair, her skin, and even the nun's habit she wore. The very tips of her shoulder-length hair were tightly coiled, like wool.

The first thing I did was look down at myself to ensure I still had my equipment.

"Ha-ha, you're both trapped!" the woman said. *"There's only one way out of here, you see, and that's— Wait, wait, wait, what are you doing?!"*

White chains came out of nowhere, catching my sword mid-swing and knocking Shuria's knife out of her hands.

“What do you mean?” I asked, indignant. “We wake up captured and come face-to-face with someone who seems to know what’s going on. Why wouldn’t we attack?”

“I’m not your enemy...! Hey!”

“You just said we were trapped,” said Shuria. “Well, release us, please. I’m afraid we’re in a hurry.”

Yes. We were in a hurry. We needed to save Master!! We needed to save him before...

“It was just a joke! I’m sorry! Look, I won’t do it again, I promise!”

“Just let us out of here already!”

“We need to help Kaito!! Stay out of our way!!”

I poured all my mana into a spear-like projectile of ice, while Shuria used her magical threads to snatch her knife back from off the floor. But the woman flitted to and fro as though she were made of air, effortlessly dodging our attacks.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. These girls are crazy! Is this what being around the hero does to a lady?! Time out, time out! You two are no fun at all! You’re scary! Towa, help me!”

Suddenly, there was a sound like clunking gears, and the pure white ceiling slowly turned a bright shade of green.

“For crying out loud. This is why I wanted to do the talking. I knew you were too happy-go-lucky to handle the exposition.”

“Huh?! What is it now?!” Shuria cried, as the woman’s hair and skin turned the same shade of green as the roof, and she began shedding little motes of viridian light like snow. Her kitten-like, frivolous personality completely disappeared and was replaced by a cool, calm voice like flowing water. It was as if a completely different person had taken over her body.

“Now, then. Having said that, it seems they must be restrained for the sake of a decent conversation... A mooring bind for the boring mind: Link Spillwind.”

“Wh-what’s happening?!”

“Hrgh! Wh...what...grh!!”

I readied myself for anything, but the spell the woman cast was nothing I could defend against. It was like someone had driven invisible wedges into my joints one after the other, forcibly manipulating my body. Shuria and I fell to our knees in a position called *seiza* that Master often had us adopt for his lessons.

I tried to resist, but I found I could not control my mana at all, much less cast a spell.

“Grh... Why...can’t I...?”

I tried to break free of the mysterious sorcery by force, but then I discovered I could barely even move.

“Ah, that’s a technique called Aiki, written into the very laws of this world’s magic. It dampens any fluctuation of power, magical or physical. It’s not something you two possess the strength to deny, so why don’t we all just calm down and have a nice chat, hmm?”

The woman’s flowery smile was accompanied by an aura of intimidation. She had evaluated our skill level and found us wanting. And as painful as it was to admit, she was correct.

Still, that was no reason to give up. We couldn’t back down.

“Rr...raaaaaaaaghh!!”

“Grrrrrrrrrrrrrghh!!”

“H-hey! Stop it, you’ll hurt yourself if you try to force it!”

I felt my joints cry out in pain, but that was okay. I didn’t care what happened to me.

Because the bond I had forged with Master was nowhere to be found.

I had to help him. I had to help him. I had to help him. I had to help him!!

“A...little...pain...!!”

“...Won’t...stop...us!!”

“Hmm. That’s strange. The current hero shouldn’t have enough power to influence his followers across worlds. Ah, perhaps you think that your life is still

linked to his through the bond? Perhaps I underestimated you two after all."

""Gwah!""

Suddenly, the mysterious restraints snapped, and we collapsed to the floor in blinding agony. Still, we lifted ourselves up as best we could. I felt ready to lose consciousness when I suddenly recalled the image of Master bleeding out on the floor.

"Well, bravo, I must say, for breaking free of that spell. Still, it was rather a shortsighted effort at best. What exactly did you plan to do next, hmm?"

"We can't give up... If you're able to somehow negate Master's abilities...we need to stop you...and quickly..."

"Kaito's gone. I can't feel him anymore... We need to see him!"

We had yet to give anything back. All we'd done was take, take, take. He pulled us out of the darkness, granted us strength, walked along the blood-soaked path with us, ate of the fruit of vengeance together with us.

He'd allowed us to kill those who wronged us, but Master's vengeance was yet incomplete. For him to die before getting a chance to experience what he gave us...

"Hmm? Hold on, you two. Would you happen to be under the impression that your bond with him is gone? If that's the case, it implies your deaths and his are not linked anymore, so what reason do you have to fight me? Hmm...? Not now, Luna. the grown-ups are talking. And you, Metelia, are unsuited to this as well. Your soul is damaged, and you are too quick to get emotional. And don't get me started on— Hey, I said cut it out!"

There was the sound of shifting gears again, and this time the roof turned pink. Again, the woman in front of us changed color, with her hair, her clothes, and the light particles all transforming to match the ceiling. She took on a third personality this time, shaking her arms and legs in anger.

"Shut uuup!! God, Towako! How can you be so smart and so dense at the same time? You're almost as bad as Luna! Aren't you both girls?! You should understand!!"

Almost immediately after that, however, there was another clunk, and this time the right-hand wall turned a jade green. Then a second girl, possibly five years old, split from the first woman and appeared by her side. She looked like a younger version of the same person, with hair and clothes that matched the verdant wall.

“Nn...nnrrgh! See, Metelia?” the little one said. “There’s your irrational side again. Besides, I don’t see how my gender is relevant. I always consider things logically...”

“But a girl’s mind isn’t logical! That’s why you’ll never understand! You’re just an idiot! A big, fat dummy!”

“Wh-what did you just call me...?”

“Well, it’s true! What idiot tries to use logic on someone acting emotionally? You go stand in the corner over there, Towako! Go on! Off you go!”

“H-hey! I object to this treatment, I’ll have you know!”

The pink-haired woman gave the little girl a push, shooing her away into the corner of the room. Then, turning to us, she said, *“First things first. Let’s heal those wounds of yours... Smiling waters, Angel Ring: Blue Healing.”*

She raised her arm to chant a spell, and two rings of light appeared above our heads. From out of the rings came a stream of light-blue particles that soaked into our skin and gradually restored our health.

“The damage to your flesh will heal quickly, but the scars on your souls will take a while longer. Shall we have a little chat until then? There’s nothing to fear, for we are not your enemies. Won’t you hear us out? We all just want to help Kaito.”

“But we have to hurry!” cried Shuria. “Kaito’s about to be killed! In fact, he might already be...no, no, no! I don’t even want to think about it!”

She pressed her hands over her ears and shook her head, screaming.

“Like I said,” muttered the girl in the corner, “You two are still alive, so that means he is as well.”

“What could you know?!” I yelled. “I can’t feel the bond anymore! Aah, a

world without Master... I would sooner perish..."

But the green-haired girl only laughed as though something were funny.

"Ha-ha-ha, don't be silly. It's nothing to kill yourselves over. I wouldn't be here offering my help if your bond was so weak as to be nullified by a mere crossing of worlds. You just have to look deep inside."

"Deep..."

"...inside?"

We did as she suggested, but all we could see and feel was a dark hole where blue-black flames had once burned, and a bitter cold that would sooner freeze the approaching hand than consume it.

"There's nothing there...", I said. "Nothing at all..."

"It's empty. Completely empty. It's cold and dark, and Kaito's gone..."

Darkness. Pitch-black.

I was all alone again.

Just like I'd been in that cage in the capital. It was exactly the same.

...The same? But wasn't that after I first kindled my flame of vengeance?

"Gone? Don't be silly. The power of heaven is far stronger than that."

I heard a faint, almost imperceptible pulse. However, try as I might, I couldn't locate the source. I couldn't see it, but I could feel the heat radiating from it.

"Ah! It *is* there! It really is!"

"Yes! It's faint, and I can't see where it's coming from, but I can feel it!"

I clutched my fists to my chest and wept, while Shuria wrapped her arms around herself and cried.

Kaito was still there, with us. He hadn't gone away.

"Towako's right. Your bond is still there. Now, let me ask you something? Is that bond something Kaito made all by himself?"

"No!"

"It's not!"

"Then think. What is it you have to do to save him?"

"B-but...if we don't hurry, then that woman will..."

"It's okay. He's safe, back in his own world. Nobody on this side can touch him."

"His own...world?"

"You both need to work hard to support Kaito when he gets back. Prove the naysayers wrong."

"What do you mean...?"

"But first, you need to learn the truth of this realm. The true nature of the princess, the priestess, the demon lord, and the hero. Why it is that these roles exist."

The pink-haired woman cast her eyes downward with a hint of sadness. But when she looked up again, her vacant eyes were full of righteous fury, like something had snapped inside her, and she began muttering maledictions under her breath.

"Then we must kill God. Excise the cancer infesting this world... Yes, that's right. Kill her. We mustn't let Kaito sully his hands on her! We'll drown that bitch in a vat of goblin shit!"

"Aah, this is why I said to leave the explaining to me. Sorry about her; she's a little disturbed and gets like this sometimes. I'll take over the exposition, if you don't mind."



The green-haired little girl came walking over.

“But before that,” she said. “I suppose we should wake up this lot. For now, rest assured that we have confirmed the current hero is alive and well.”

“L...Leone...”

The girl pointed over to a corner of the room, where Leone and the others still lay unconscious.



In the far eastern reaches of the Lunarian See, there sat a town bordering the ocean. Once famed for its beautiful waterways and stately brick buildings, the city now lay in smoldering ruins.

“Kha-ha-ha-ha! See how their cities burn!” spoke a cackling demon, two horns atop his head and a pair of bat-like wings sprouting from his back. “We are truly the most powerful race in the realm!”

In a ferocious display of power, the demon channeled mana into his outstretched arms.

“Tch. The mana buildup is weak. This must be the work of that damn barrier. Man, this sucks.”

The soldiers of the See broke out in sweat as they saw the demons summon up their dark powers in spite of the great barrier’s protection.

“Curse it all! How did demons get this far south?! I thought the fighting was up north!”

“Where are the reinforcements?! Have the paladins from the holy city arrived yet?”

“Hold the line! Yield no quarter!”

Caught unawares, the city guard was in total shambles. The chain of command was broken, but the guards still fought valiantly to protect the citizenry, believing reinforcements were close at hand.

“T-take this, foul beasts! *Angel’s Light Formation!*”

“““Aye-aye!”””

Several warriors clasped their hands together in prayer and threw up a shield of green and blue light. However, the demon only sneered at their efforts.

“Hmph. Don’t bother me with your pathetic barrier, worms.”

The demon unleashed a spell that shattered the shield in an instant.

“““Graaaaagh!!”””

The force of the destructive blast threw the city guards to the ground.

“Ha-ha-ha!! Just as weak as I suspected. I’ll eradicate every last one of you and use this town as a base to take down the great barrier. Then *I’ll* be the true demon lord!”

“O holy water, pierce this evil! *Rushing Waters: Holy Stream!*”

A noise rang out so loud it could be heard even over the chaos of battle. A spear of water glowing white shot through the air and ran straight through the demon before disappearing, leaving a gaping hole in his torso.

“...Wh-what?! Ghuh!”

Though demons were hardier still than the stoutest of beastfolk, few were powerful enough to survive an attack of that caliber. The demon crumpled to the ground.

“Gentlemen, you have fought well, but there is nothing to fear now. So long as the light of our Lady Lunaris shines down upon us, the demons shall never prevail.”

Standing there, with a voice as clear and pure as running water, was the priestess, Metelia Laurelia. Her white robes and porcelain staff combined to create an image so majestic, so awe-inspiring, that it was as though heaven’s light itself shone down upon her.

After a moment of silence, the guards erupted into cheers.

“I-it’s the priestess! We’re saved!!”

“Lady Laurelia! Oh, I knew Lunaris had not forsaken us!”

Then one of the soldiers came over, carrying a wounded comrade on his back.

“Lady Metelia, please! This man became a father just last month! Use your

healing arts to save him, I beg of you!”

“Calm down, my child. So long as they still draw breath, everyone here shall be saved. O healing wave of light, seek all in need of solace. Healing Waters: *Ripple Drop!*”

Metelia swung her staff, and a ripple spread outward from her, healing anyone it touched in the blink of an eye. Even the critically injured had their wounds miraculously disappear, and the color returned to their cheeks as they crawled back from death’s door.

“Oh, thank you, thank you, Lady Metelia! Praise be to Lunaris’s benevolence!”

The soldier embraced his friend, weeping openly.

“Y-you... Priest...ess...”

“Oh? Stubborn, aren’t we? I thought that last attack would have finished you off for good.”

Somehow, the demon managed to stop the bleeding by reforming a layer of muscle across his wound and staggered to his feet.

“Know your place...lowly humans...!!”

Just then, other demons noticed the disturbance and flocked together.

“Who’s that chick? Hey, check out the loser who lost to a girl. What a chump!”

“Damn, he got creamed. Sucks to be him.”

“Musta let his guard down. Best not to mess around with these pests, just kill them as quick as you can.”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! That girl looks so yummy! 🎵”

“Oh, god, the demons, they’re everywhere!”

As soon as one soldier spoke up, the terror spread. Each demon sported monstrous features, striking fear into the hearts of the troops.

“You’re finished, worm. No human can stand up to this many of—”

“*Prison of Water: Holy Stream Binding!*”

No sooner had Metelia spoken the words of her incantation than magical ropes of holy water materialized in midair, wrapping around the horde.

“Wh-what is this?!”

“Holy water?!”

“I—I can’t break free! How is this possible?”

“Agh, this water stings!”

“I’m sorry to say you have caught me in a rotten mood today,” said Metelia. “I cannot let any further harm befall this precious city and its precious inhabitants. Now, kneel before the majesty of our Lady of Light!”

“Wow...such power...”

“What a divine light...”

As Metelia focused her mana into her staff, the tip chimed like a bell and glowed with a shimmering, halo-like light.

“Hang from the tower the white bell of thunder and lay your offerings beneath.”

“Wh-what?! How could one human possess so much power?!”

“It’s not possible! It’s not it’s not it’s not!”

“Damn you, priestess, puny servant of god!”

“This is some kind of trick! It can’t be happening!”

The magical light struck fear and shock into the hearts of the demons, who, versed in spellcraft as they were, recognized its terrifying potential. The words poured from Metelia’s lips like spring water, like a song to the tune of her ringing staff.

“Let all be judged. Grant us the clear waters, that the light which surrounds it shall banish the wicked.”

Just as the mass of twinkling light reached its zenith and Metelia seemed ready to burst with mana, she swung her staff, and a large crystal bell materialized in the air above the trapped demons’ heads.

“We’re saved!!”

“Our Lady watches over us after all! Everyone, praise Metelia and Lunaris!”

The town erupted in earsplitting cheers. All that remained of the infernal invasion was a smattering of monsters and lesser demons.

“Now, my people. Let us unite and cast the wickedness out of our city! Under the light of Lunaris, let Her power be known!”

Metelia beamed a heavenly smile and spurred the soldiers to fight again. They slew the monsters and lesser demons with renewed vigor, and before long, the sounds of battle had given way to raucous cheers of triumph.

“...”

...Leaving Metelia all by herself, troubles weighing on her heart.

“Are you sure about this?”

Aah, it was the same dream again. The one I’d been having ever since I sent Kaito back to his world. Over and over again. A scene from my past that never transpired.

“Lunaris granted me a vision last night. She directed me to declare Kaito an enemy of God.”

“Hmm. Well, he did manage to keep an awful lot of heaven’s power. I suppose she’s worried he might turn that power against her. She’s desperate. She wants him out of her world at all costs. But she can’t just send him back to his own world and let him run around with all that power. She’s too proud to allow it. So killing him is the only option she has left.”

I couldn’t quite make out where we were, as everything was white and clouded. The only thing I could see was myself, speaking with another woman.

“I know it’s painful, but there was never any way you two could be together.”

The woman shrugged. She looked almost exactly the same as the woman who had snatched Kaito’s pets away after I sent him back to his world. The only difference was that this woman’s hair and the fake Lunarian robe she wore were emerald-green.

“...I can no longer hold faith in Lady Lunaris. And I cannot follow her orders. However, I won’t be able to hold out for long. With each passing day, I feel more and more as if I am turning into someone else.”

“Hmm, I see. So you can’t stop it, huh? Well, I do have a suggestion. It’s not safe, and there’s no guarantee it’ll even work, but then again, messing with souls isn’t exactly the domain of us mere mortals. Maybe I could do more if I was still alive, but right now, this is the best I can do. Just don’t go expecting it to work miracles, okay?”

“That is fine. If I do nothing, then my feelings will overcome me before long. I do not possess the luxury of choice. If there is the slightest chance it allows me to fight back, then please do whatever you can.”

I couldn’t make sense of it at all. From my lips came words I thought I would never say.

What was this dream? What did it mean?

“Hmm, that’s good. I like your attitude. Believe me, I know how much it sucks to have your life dictated by somebody else. But let me be clear: This technique will split your soul in two, which leaves the remainder far more susceptible to Lunaris’s influence. We might be able to use the duplicated soul to overwrite the original in the case of any corruption, and if that works, it’ll make you immune to any subsequent interference. However, if your soul becomes so damaged that it can’t be restored...”

“You don’t need to worry about that. No matter how much I change, my feelings for him will never waver.”

The foggy world faded away before answering any of my myriad questions, and I awoke in confusion. Only a single line from my dream echoed in my mind.

“I love Kaito. And nothing can ever change that.”

The person in that dream was undoubtedly myself. But what did this all mean?

“Lady Metelia! Lady Metelia!”

“...Aah! Haah...haah...”

I awoke in a room at the local church. My handmaiden was gently rocking me, calling my name.

“You sounded as if you were having a bad dream, my lady. I wonder if I might not persuade my lady to refrain from any strenuous exertion for a while? Reinforcements are on their way from the empire and the beast lands...”

“...I cannot. The barrier must not fall, under any circumstances.”

The Lunarian See was home to the Holy Crystal, a magical substance that generated the barrier stretching over the entire continent. It was this shield that kept the demons’ power in check, and if it were to fall, a wave of darkness would devour the land.

There was one very important reason I could not allow that to happen.

I shall need the crystal and a sacrifice of demons in order to summon Kaito back here. Aah, detestable demon lord, how much longer will you continue to stand in my way?

I had hoped to begin by curtailing the influence of the kingdom, but this warranted a change of plan. With my cryptic dreams and the abrupt end to any visions from Lunaris of late, my list of worries kept on growing.

“Hmm? Lady Metelia?”

“Ah, apologies. I was lost in thought. I shall leave town today and head for the front lines.”

There was much to worry about and much to do.

Still, with my thoughts of Kaito for company, I could do anything.

I just needed to keep the faith.



In a hidden training area somewhere in the royal castle of the Orollea Kingdom...

“Is that it?”

This could not be. It could not. My name was Gagerland! I should have been this land’s champion! So why?

“Come, stand. Or is that all you can muster?”

How had it come to this? It defied explanation.

“You were our party’s warrior. I assumed you would be a little stronger than this. Perhaps that was wrong of me.”

Her hair, like silver thread, glistened in the sunlight as her narrow sword cut cleanly through the air.

I had been captain of my town’s guard when I was first approached to teach the princess swordsmanship. At first, I thought it had been a joke. Me, a rank commoner, made private tutor to royalty? And the princess, so young in years and weak of arm. I was doubtful she would prove a competent learner.

However, I could not refuse a request from the royal family, and so I came to the castle as instructed and decided on a mock battle to gauge the princess’s strength.

And yet she’d disarmed me in a flash and sent me falling on my butt.

“You are fit, and I can tell you have been training,” she said, “but in terms of practical experience, you aren’t even on the level of the royal guard.”

How can this be? How can this be?!

The situation was so ridiculous I could not even put the thought to words.

Whatever reason they had for choosing me, I couldn’t let this chance go to waste. Opportunities to impress the nobility were rare, and if I could catch the eye of the royal family, my fame and renown would be assured. With the demon lord’s armies on the rise, perhaps I could even earn myself a place in the hero’s party.

The hero, selected through tournament, dressed in silver armor from head to toe. What a cowardly way of choosing who would get the title. If that royal pain hadn’t shown up, I would be this land’s champion!

Yes... I need to prove myself. That bastard who stole my spot will get his silver ass handed to him once the real fighting starts. Then I can rise up and take his place. I’ll be the hero, the man, the legend. The greatest champion this land has ever known!!

I was sure of it. There was no way it could be any different!

All I had to do was parry the princess's blows, earn her trust, and then...and then...!

That moment, a sweet, flowery scent hit my nostrils, and my own voice echoed in my mind.

...How could a man bested by a single girl ever call himself a hero?

"Aah...Aah...!!"

The gulf between my dreams and cruel reality threatened to crush me.

This can't be happening. It can't, it can't, it can't!

"Bullshiiiiit!!"

Before I was even aware of what I was doing, I had drawn my real sword and was lunging for the princess.

Oh shit!

It was an act of unbridled rage. But by the time I realized this, it was already too late. The point of my steel blade was almost upon the princess's throat when...

"Flower of Submission: Primathum."

...she turned to dust in an instant.

And in her place was an impossibly beautiful sight.

"Huh? Wh-what...?"

It was a large pink-petaled flower. As the tip of my sword made contact, it was rendered to silver dust, forming a pile of sand at my feet. When I pulled the hilt free, I discovered that the only part of my sword that remained was the hilt.

"My, you truly are weak."

Those words were like frigid water on my soul. When I thought back on what I had just done, I began to feel dizzy. I had attempted regicide, an act of high treason. They'd decapitate my entire family and decorate the castle walls with our heads. My wife, waiting in the other room for my return, would never be

able to show her face in public again...

My mind reeled as the consequences of my rash behavior began to sink in.

"I...no... Princess, please, have mercy, I just...my hand slipped! I would never attempt to harm Your Highness!!"

I kneeled at her feet in terror, my face pressed to the floor.

"...Lift your gaze, Gagerland."

I couldn't. I feared what I might see if I did. But the princess would not allow me to stay silent forever, so I cautiously I looked up...

"...Ah."

The person standing there didn't seem like the princess at all. She was a kindly young girl, with a sweet and gentle smile.

"Fear not," she said. "I would never forsake a brave warrior who has given so much for his country. It is patriots like you, Gagerland, who make our kingdom great, and it is you I would ask to defend our homeland."

"Oh...oh...Lunaris bless you, Your Highness."

She's not going to have me killed?

I wasn't quite sure how to respond to this strange turn of events. The princess was just as loving, kind, and, some might say, naive as people said.

"However, Gagerland, you are not yet ready to be a hero. If you were to do battle with our nation's enemies now, you would be mercilessly slain."

The girl hung her head in sorrow.

"I must impart to you one of the great secrets handed down through generations of our kingdom's history."

Saying this, she extended her hand. She was clutching what looked like a large seed.

"Wh-what is this?"

"It will grant you the power to change the world. This is how I acquired the strength I now wield."

“It will?”

I took the seed from the girl’s porcelain palm. I could feel a great power lurking within it.

This seed is the source of the princess’s strength? Impossible. But then...how else could she have bested me? If it’s true that this seed can grant me the power I seek, then...

I gulped. “S-so you’re saying...I can have this?”

“Yes. Simply swallow it whole, without chewing. The Great Spirit’s power dwells within. Take it into your flesh, absorb its strength, and become a champion worthy of defending our kingdom.”

“Me...a champion?”

My lips crept up at the sound.

“Cast aside your doubts, Gagerland. You have been chosen.”

“Yes! I swear to lay down my life in defense of this great nation!”

I raised the seed, about the size of a ration pill, to my mouth and swallowed it. An instant later, a searing pain coursed through my body, and I fell to my hands and knees in agony.

“Grgh... Graaaaagh?!”

It burned! Oh god, it burned!

It felt like my whole body was being remade. I couldn’t so much as think through the blinding pain. I lacked even the strength to lift my head, and so I could not see Alicia’s expression when my consciousness was ripped away.



“This is a trial from the Great Spirit. Do try not to let the Seed of the World Tree consume you.”

I gave a gentle smile and looked down at the form of the groaning yet unconscious Gagerland before calling out to my maidservant.

“Take him to his room, if you please.”

I clapped my hands toward the vacant-eyed servant girl standing in the corner of the room, and she effortlessly hoisted the large frame of the warrior man onto her shoulder. To an outside observer, such a feat would have seemed more than a little strange.

Fortunate, then, that there are none left. Guidott, the knight commander, was the last in the castle to fall under my control.

“Oh my. The princess can be such a taskmistress sometimes. Don’t you agree?”

“...”

The servant girl’s leave was balanced by the arrival of a rather rude-spoken elf of unquestionably dubious appearance. The elf, Endimir, flashed a mocking grin and put his arm around the slightly shorter figure at his side, a person dressed head to toe in a full helm and plate mail.

“Endimir!!” I roared. “Remove your filthy elf hands at once!!”

“Whoa! No need to scream, Princess. Why, somebody might think I was up to no good!”

Without chanting, I tossed a tightly focused Fireball spell about the size of a piece of candy. However, just before it struck the elf’s shoulder, it dropped from its path and into his open palm, where it fizzled into nothing.

This smug bastard made me want to tear out my hair, but at least I had forced him to retract his wandering hand.

“Come now, Princess. You know we elves are your friends, so why all this animosity?”

“Friends? Ha! The only people deserving of my love and respect are the citizens of this country. We are allies, perhaps, but do not presume that this excuses your race from its crimes against this land. You disgust me, mongrel, and the fact I tolerate your presence at all should be proof enough of my goodwill.”

“Oh dear. And after everything I taught you, as well...”

Endimir shrugged off my insults with stoic patience. That spoke not to his

magnanimity, but to the fact that he did not see our nation as a threat, so his flippancy only vexed me more.

...No, I must remain calm. I cannot allow this vile creature to unsettle me. There is more important work to be done.

“So, Endimir. What of Gagerland’s wife? Mimenya, I believe her name was. I assume you had her swallow the seed as well?”

“Of course. Hook, line, and sinker. I just had to put it like this: ‘Oh, milady. I sense that you have the talent to be on the hero’s entourage one day, and perhaps your husband will even become the hero himself. I happen to be in possession of something that might help you reach your full potential. What say you?’”

The clown began prancing about, reenacting the scene verbatim.

“Alas, my work here is done, and I shall thus take my leave. Sad news, I know, but do try not to weep for me.”

“...What are you saying?”

“I’m saying this is good-bye, Princess. Something’s come up. Or rather, it’s about to. As much as I’d like to stay for tea and crumpets, I’m afraid I must be off. However, I’m not so vulgar a gentleman that I know not to thank my host. So...thank you, Princess. You were most entertaining...for a fake.”

“W-wait! Hold it right there!!”

But there was only spectral laughter as the elf submerged into his own shadow and disappeared.

“Rrrrrrgh!! This is why I hate half-breeds!”

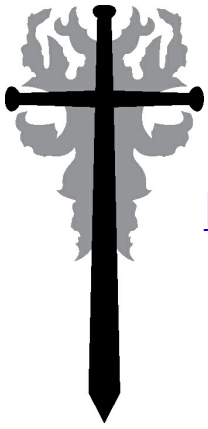
This world was for humans and humans alone. Why did I have to share it with these beasts?

“...Still. Now there is nothing left to stand between us.”

“...”

With nobody left to observe us, I extended a hand toward the silent, armored girl...and pulled her into a sweet embrace.

“Aah, Lamnecia, my dear sister. Fear not. I shall finish what you started.”



INTERMISSION

A Fool's Dream

I had always been afraid of the dark.

On moonless nights, I would sneak into my sister's bed to feel safe.

"Hmm... It seems there's nothing special about the Untargeted, and a mere relative at that."

Where were you now?

Eating isn't the same without you. I can't even tie up my hair without you.

Where did you go?

I would do anything for you. That was the only thing I still remembered.

"Come, little Kaori, it's time to begin. Don't worry, it won't hurt. It'll all be over very quickly."

A dark room. A small room. A room that reeked of mold.

Where were you? Where did you go?

I'll do whatever it takes. Whatever it takes to find you.

So please.

Come back to me. Hold me. Stroke my hair. Tell me that you love me.

"Let's do our best to track down your sister Shiori, shall we?"

Please.



It was cold. It was dark. It was dirty.

Where was I? How did I end up here?

“Hmm, another failure. Looks like the Untargeted are a load of duds. The results from the mana test are disappointing, too. Perhaps that’s exactly why they *weren’t* targeted? *Sigh*. This is getting me nowhere. For the sake of my research, I need to capture a *Reject*.”

“...Ah...eh...aah...ah...”

From my lips came a voice so strained I could hardly believe it was my own. No, this was no voice. Merely the sound of air passing through me.

My throat had been destroyed long ago.

“Ah, not to worry. You’re still useful to me. So long as you’re still alive, there’s lots of experiments we can do on you that we can’t do on Kaori. It’s faint, but the mana test is showing results. Aah, my ancestors were right. Kheh-heh-heh. They all laughed, those ignorant buffoons. But they were all jealous of my greatness! Well, who’s laughing now?!”

I heard the mad laughter as if through a speaker. Oh, yes, that was right. My ears had been destroyed as well.

“Hee-hee-hee. *Phew*. Now, it’s time to begin today’s experiment. The more we fatten you up, the more mana we’ll get out of you! Isn’t that good? You’ll be instrumental in making me one of the most powerful mages of all time!”

That’s right! That’s it!

I was broken! Broken!

And it was all because of the person in front of me!

Why?! How could this have happened...?

“Now, let’s try this ritual today. It’s supposed to allow you to see into the spirit plane. Granted, it takes away your ability to view reality, but why would you want to keep looking at this ugly world, hmm?”

No...no...no...NOOOOOOOOOO!!

“...Ah...aah...ah...”

Help me! Somebody save me!

Mai! Satomi! Anyone!

Get me out of here!! Mom, Dad! I want to go home!!

“Now, now, there’s nothing to fear. Let’s begin.”

Somebody...help me...



“Dammit! Dammit! Dammit! Dammit! Aaaaaaaagh!!”

No expense had been spared in the creation of this underground laboratory of mine.

I was so close! Just one step away from achieving my dreams, but he betrayed me!

“Damn you! What have you done?!”

In the darkened room, I let out all the anger and frustration I usually kept concealed.

“That damn shut-in. That worthless loser. How many times did I tell him not to kill her?! Now look at what he’s done, that imbecile!”

Gripped by emotional rage, I kicked the wall and vomited. When that proved insufficient to dispel my anger, I slammed my fists against the wall. My ears rang, and I felt just a little of the boiling heat transfer from my brain to my stinging hands.

“Phew... Tch. Now I need to alter the research schedule. Their souls separate from their bodies once they die. I need to do whatever I can with what remains, and then...”

I ruffled my hair, took a deep breath, and opened the door leading out of my lab. Out in the hallway, the stairway leading up was on my right, while to my left was a room with four colored doors, all facing each other: red, blue, yellow, and green. The red and blue rooms were currently in use, while the yellow room contained the corpse. I entered to find it lying on a slab, pale and

bloodless, and partially covered by a sheet.

“Now, where to begin?”

I touched the girl’s cold skin and tugged open her stiff eyelids with my thumb. Her lifeless eyes were dim and vacant. As I tilted her head, her white lips fell partially open.

“These materials are not easy to replace, and a lot of planning goes into their acquisition...”

A list of tasks flitted through my mind, dividing itself neatly into two piles: those I could do with a corpse and those I could not. I tore off the sheet and smiled.

“Let’s make the most of our time together, Satomi! 🎵”

The pallid object on my table was no longer a human being but a lump of flesh. It was in pristine condition, save the large cut across the abdomen, where I had sliced her open. However...

“...Aah, that’s what I like to see. The traces are far more strongly pronounced in this specimen, even in death. Not like those Untargeted at all. The Touched are a different breed!”

I poured a mottled green-and-blue solution over the body, and crimson particles rose into the air. The magical reaction with her was far stronger than with those who had simply been there at the time. If only she were alive, and her soul still present, it would have brought me that much closer to unraveling the secrets of the summoning spell.

“Heh. Hee-hee-hee. I *will* find a way. There has to be a way. A path into the world from which that spell originated, a land overflowing with mana...”

I rifled around for a silver tool engraved with magical carvings and grinned, licking my lips in anticipation. Soon, very soon, it would be mine. True magic, like that wielded by the mages of old.

This world had lost its magic, and even the simplest of miracles could no longer be performed. Everyone with the ability to manipulate mana had died out. But soon, it would be mine, and with it, the beginnings of a new race of

proud mages!



“Aaaaaaagh!! It’s not working!! This cannot be!!”

I drew large crosses across the pieces of paper scattered over my desk, then slammed my fist, pen still in hand, into the table before crumpling up the papers into a ball.

“Aaaargh!! Why not?! Why not?! What’s missing?! What do I still need to do?!”

I was furious. Rage clouded my mind. Why now, when I was just one step away? My goal was almost in reach, so tantalizing it drove me mad.

“What is it?! What am I missing?!”

I had analyzed all the data resulting from my experiments, but not a single scrap of it had given me the result I desired. There was nothing more I could get out of my hard-earned test subjects now.

“...It’s just not enough. A relative of the Summoned, an Untargeted, and even the corpse of a Touched. They’re all just by-products.”

Worthless rejects only gave me worthless data. My research was going nowhere.

“...It’s time to proceed to the next phase.”

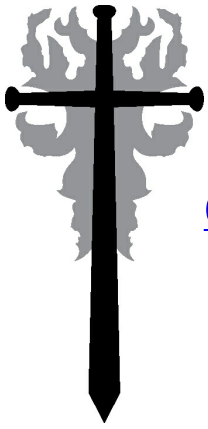
He had appeared to me in my darkest hour, as if granted by God. If my experiments so far were for anything, it was all to ensure that I wouldn’t let his unique existence go to waste.

Soon, very soon, I would tear open a hole between worlds to spill fresh mana and rejuvenate this dying land, enabling me to partake of the power of the outer void and usher in a new age of legend.

“I shall be the greatest sorcerer this world has ever known! Hee-hee-hee. For I alone possess the blood of my ancestors, and none shall stand against me!! Keh-heh-ha-ha-ha!!”

Yes, and I would transcend all human reckoning! A new stage of life! Ah-ha-

ha-ha!!



CHAPTER 3

A Life Irrevocably Changed

Two months had passed since I was discharged from the hospital. It was now the middle of winter, and my skin bristled in the cold and desiccated air.

Returning to my regular school life hadn't been nearly as bad as I feared. I knew few of the underclassmen, due to my general dislike of social clubs and extracurricular activities, and even many of my peers were strangers, as classes weren't shuffled until entering third year. My only acquaintances in the entire school were Yuuto and Mai.

Almost all the students in my class had disappeared. The lucky few who'd avoided that fate all happened to be running somewhere and had tripped and fallen in surprise when the circles materialized, or had otherwise avoided the magic circles when they appeared. That was how Mai had been spared. She'd been late to school for once in her life and was rushing to class when it happened.

However, the handful of my classmates who'd survived lost their lives soon afterward.

About a month before I came back, Mai's friend, Satomi, had been murdered, and there were the stabbings from six months before that as well. Every last one of my classmates had died in random killings, almost like someone was pulling the strings behind the scenes. Even Mai's friend Yuuki had gone missing without a trace.

The only people still alive from the old class 2-3 were me and Yuuto.

That meant I didn't know very many people in my new class. I'd prepared myself for a barrage of questions, like a transfer student at my own school. No doubt they would all be clamoring to hear where I had been and what I had done.

However, it turned out nobody wanted to ask me about the incident.

"Everyone's been hurt in one way or another by what happened..." Yuuto told me, a bitter smile on his lips. *"And they've all been told that you don't remember a thing."*

I felt ashamed to have been worried when I heard that. How could I have been so thoughtless?

The school seemed concerned about my well-being, because they had put me in Mai's class and seated me next to her. Thanks to that, it didn't take long for me to grow accustomed to my new surroundings. And with my peers treating me as normally as they could, I soon settled into a new routine only marginally different from the one I'd had before.

"All right, time to give back the tests from the other day. Be sure to look over them before class!"

Our homeroom teacher's voice echoed throughout the room as cries of joy and despair erupted from my classmates.

"I feel like I made a pretty dumb mistake on the last math question," said my sister, the perfect honor student that she was. "I don't even want to look at my score."

However, my heart was pounding.

"D-did you now?"

When my name was called, I walked to the front of the class, picked up my stack of test papers, and brought it back to my desk, making sure not to let Mai see them!

"Dear brother? What's the matter?"

"I...er...need to run to the bathroom."

I immediately stepped out of the classroom and headed down the hallway, test papers in hand. Once inside the restroom, I entered the first open stall and locked myself inside, before taking my first hesitant look at the test sheets.

“Oof.”

My fears were confirmed when I saw the scores. Heartbroken, I cast my eyes skyward. Not that there was a sky in there to see.

Mai's gonna kill me when she finds out...

“Kaito... You’ve made me so upset. Why is my dear brother such a feeble-minded moron?”

I could see it now. I shivered in fright and crumpled the failed test papers into a ball.

If Mai found out about this, she’d have me on twenty-four-hour surveillance, studying in my room from dawn till dusk, all seven days of the week. Even though my life had only recently been thrown into shambles, she wouldn’t take that as an excuse.

Mai had changed when she picked up *naginata* all those years ago. Along with improving her fitness and general health, the sport seemed to instill in her a merciless obsession with rigid, structured training, and she would force such procedures on me with a smile.

This one time in middle school, I’d played too many video games and failed a test. Even Mom and Dad hadn’t been able to save me from her. I did get a perfect score on the make-up exam, though.

“However, my dear little sister, you are forgetting one very important fact. A big brother never loses. And unlike a certain cartoon boy whose name rhymes with ‘Bobita,’ I won’t make the mistake of disposing of this evidence somewhere it can be found.”

With that, I tore the papers up and flushed them down the toilet, one at a time so it wouldn’t get clogged.

“...There. Evidence destroyed.”

And my punishment with it. No matter how suspicious it looked, Mai wouldn’t

get angry if she couldn't prove anything. She'd always been logical-minded like that.

I'd say, *"Well, you know, I ran out of paper,"* and she'd say, *"That's disgusting. Learn some tact,"* and that would be that.

I casually sauntered out into the hallway, feeling like a king, and returned to the classroom with my head held high.

"Welcome back, dear brother," said Mai as I returned to my seat. Homeroom had ended, and we still had about five minutes before classes started.

"Oh, sorry about that," I said. "My stomach just started killing me. And to make matters worse, there was no paper in the stall."

"I see. And so you used your tests instead. Is that right, my useless brother?"

"Huh?"

I hadn't expected that.

Uh-oh. Something's off. I don't like this...

The sweat dribbled down my brow as an awful feeling overcame me.

"Something the matter, Kaito? You're sweating."

"A-am I? There must be something wrong with the air conditioning. Ah-ha-ha-ha..."

"No, there isn't. The repair people just came to fix it last week. And the temperature in here is rather pleasant."

"O-oh, really? That's weird. Ha-ha..."

Mai gave a sharp sigh.

"Kaito, as your sister, I shall stick by your side no matter who you become, whether you get off on torturing women, are aroused by your own sibling, or develop an unhealthy obsession with the shapes of women's feet."

A chill ran down my spine.

"Wh-wh-wh-what are you talking about?! Please stop. Your big brother has a reputation to uphold! Everyone's staring at us, and look! Nakamura's even

trying to move his desk away! You're dragging my name through the mud!"

"Oh? I would have thought a piece of human garbage who obstructs public services by flushing his own embarrassing test scores down the toilet would have no reputation to save."

Shit. How did she know?

Welp, my bright idea had gone the way of my test papers. By the sight of Mai's threatening aura, I'd say she'd found plenty of reasons to be angry, proof or not.

"And just look at these deplorable scores. It makes me so sad. Although I suppose that's to be expected from a vandal who damages school property."

Mai waved a bundle of papers with a sigh of distress. Papers that ought to have been halfway to the ocean by now!

"What?! H-h-how did you get those?!"

Mai waved the test slowly enough that I could still see the scores.

"I never imagined you would betray me like this, dear brother. Though it filled my heart with guilt, I asked the teachers to make a second copy, just in case."

Mai heaved another sigh.

"I cannot believe it has come to this. I pity you, dear brother, I really do."

"I-if you pity me...th-then may I humbly suggest...and this is just my opinion...but maybe you could...consider...letting me off the hook? Maybe?"

"Kaito," said Mai, showing not a shred of this pity she allegedly felt. "Let's draw up a study schedule together when lunchtime comes around."

Right then, the class bell rang, mercilessly shooting down any hope I had of objecting.

"Ah. Farewell, my peaceful days. Tranquility can be so very fleeting."

It appeared the routine to which I would be returning would involve a lot of late nights, and a lot of books.

On one of those very days, I was studying over at Yuuto's, a fancy apartment in the center of town.

“Grrr...that’s enough. I need a break...”

Yuuto said he had no family. His mother had passed away while he was just finishing elementary school, and he lived off regular payments from his father. However, his relationship with his dad was not without its problems. He’d only ever told us about it the first time he invited us over.

I waited a while as Yuuto checked my answers, listening to the squeaking of his marker against the paper.

“...Well, I think that’s enough math for today. You should be able to pass that test now,” he said.

“Really? All right! Great success!” I cried, pumping my fist.

Of course, I was incredibly grateful for my friend’s time, seeing as how he had university exams coming up, but right now, I was just pleased to be studying as little as humanly possible. So pleased that I was ready to strike a pose!

“Right, on to social studies next, Kaito.”

“What...?”

“What do you mean, *what*? You failed that, too, didn’t you? Sorry, Kaito, but I’m not your friend today. Mai threat—I mean, *asked* me to be strict with you,” said Yuuto, flitting his gaze to a corner of the room.

What the hell, Mai? What dirt could you possibly have on this perfect gentleman of a friend?

“Still, I suppose a little break couldn’t hurt. I’m gonna run to the store. You want a coffee or anything?”

“Yeah, can you get me the brand that has the snowflake on it?”

“...You know that’s just coffee-flavored milk, right?”

Yuuto gave a snarky grin and disappeared out the door. I placed my pen on the table and lay back onto the wood-paneled flooring, letting the numbers spill from my overworked brain.

...*I hope Mai’s okay*, I thought, as I listened to the constant ticking of the wall clock. Today was Satomi’s 100-day memorial wake. It was originally supposed to

be only for her family, but Mai was a close enough friend to Satomi that her parents had allowed her to attend.

“ ... ”

I remembered her smile, tinged with sadness and grief, as my sister had left the house that morning.

“...All right, enough of that. Time to find out what dirt I can gather, too.”

I flipped onto my feet and decided to go search Yuuto’s room. I didn’t need to get caught up in Mai’s sadness as well. I needed to take my mind off it, so that she could come back home to someone pleasant to be around.

“Let’s start in here. I wonder if Yuuto has any dirty mags under his bed?”

I was just fooling around, same as always.

But I was woefully unprepared for what awaited me there.

“ ... ”

Once I opened the door, my words, my thoughts, all vanished.

This wasn’t a teenage boy’s room. It was a cage. The walls were plastered with newspaper cuttings, online articles, forum posts, social media profiles, and photographs, the faces of which had all been crossed out in red pen.

It was as if the whole room was screaming at me. *“Why?”* it asked. *“How? It hurts. I can’t accept it. Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?”*

This was more than enough to convey how much Yuuto had been suffering this past year. How he was still hurting even now.

I gently closed the door and pressed my fist against it, then my forehead.

“Why did it have to turn out like this...?” came my weak, strained voice. It was just as well there was nobody there to hear it.

When Yuuto returned, we had a quick refreshment break and got right back to studying. I never mentioned what I’d seen in his room. I didn’t know what to say.

I got on quietly with my problems while Yuuto read a book.

“Oh, isn’t it about time for your appointment?”

I checked my watch. It was three PM.

“Crap, I’m late,” I said, getting to my feet. “I’d better hurry.”

I’d made the appointment last week. I gathered up my things and got ready to leave.

“Make sure you get some revision in tonight. You don’t want to be stuck taking make-up classes.”

“Yeah, I know. I don’t want to know what Mai has in store for me if I fail *another* test. I need to reclaim my dignity.”

“You really are obsessed with her,” Yuuto said.

“No, I’m not,” I shot back. “I love her a normal amount.”

With that, I opened the hallway door.

“See you, Kaito. Get well soon.”

“Thanks. See you at school.”

I left Yuuto’s apartment and walked down the busy streets toward the hospital. I was headed to the psychiatric ward to meet with a specialist Dr. Maeno had recommended. We were hoping that these sessions would hasten the return of my lost memories.

“Come on, me,” I told myself as I walked. “What have you got locked up in there? Think about how it could help Yuuto.”

Whatever it was that had been eating me up ever since the day I returned, it didn’t want to speak. The only thing I could hear were its rattling chains.

Yet somehow I knew. And once I remembered what had created this boiling heat within me, there would be no doubt.

The answer I sought was not a happy one.

“That’s right. You’re in a nice, warm place.”

I closed my eyes and listened to the gentle, soothing voice of the psychiatrist. A metronome ticked away on the table, and the sweet scent of flowers filled my

nostrils, setting my mind at ease.

Usually we just talked, but the nice old man had recently suggested a few sessions of hypnotherapy to shake things up. To be honest, though, I couldn't say it was working.

"You hear a phone ringing. You go to pick it up. You hear someone on the other side."

I tried using the psychiatrist's voice to construct an image in my mind. But my brain just couldn't keep up with what he was saying.

"It's your voice. The person on the phone is you. He's reminding you what you've forgotten. Listen carefully."

Argh! It wasn't working. I just couldn't imagine it.

As soon as he said the word "forgotten," I saw the old me, trapped within.

No! he screamed. *That's not right!*

My imagination gave up the ghost the instant I heard the voice, and the scene disappeared.

This just wasn't right. It was never going to work. The fire inside me burned a stifling black. It would never come back while my mind was at peace.

"I'm sorry, doc, but I don't think this is working..."

I opened my eyes and returned to the room, where the psychiatrist and Dr. Maeno were waiting. Obviously, Dr. Maeno was a surgeon, not a psychiatrist, but he was the one who'd observed me when I came back badly injured, so he wanted to keep an eye on my recovery.

I sat there in embarrassed silence while the psychiatrist gave a troubled glance.

"I see. Hmm. Perhaps you're not compatible with this sort of therapy after all."

He reached over and stopped the metronome.

"Sorry," I said meekly, bowing my head.

"Oh no, it's not your fault," said Dr. Maeno, patting me on the shoulder.

“Hypnosis is highly influenced by the subject’s personality, you see. It’s quite all right. There’s no hurry.”

“Quite true. We’ll end it there for today and take it slow. Nothing good ever comes from rushing this sort of thing.”

“I see... Well then, see you next time, I guess.”

“Yes. Same time next week.”

“Take care, Mr. Ukei.”

I avoided their eyes, embarrassed at the sheer lack of progress to show for my efforts. Then I bowed to the two doctors and left.

Guilt was gnawing at me, along with another inexplicable emotion. I wasn’t sure why, but it seemed to be hatred or disgust for Dr. Maeno.

For some reason, I would feel a bitter sense of nostalgia whenever he laid eyes on me, along with a tingle, like a serpent’s tongue lapping at my heart.

It was as though the me trapped deep within was trying to say something. Scream something.

Something I knew all too well.

“Huh? Mai?”

“Ah, dear brother.”

As I left the hospital, I spotted my sister waiting by the gates in her school uniform.

“Why are you...?”

“Why? I came to pick you up, obviously,” she said, pouting and looking up into my eyes. “Can you not even understand that? You really ought to be more attuned to my feelings, dear brother.”

“Aah, sorry. Thank you, Mai. But isn’t it dangerous for you to go out by yourself?”

“Don’t worry, I have a police escort. Look, there’s one over there. And over there, too.”

Mai pointed to a couple of ladies in black suits, who waved back.

Now that she mentioned it, I had a few officers watching over me as well. Even without them, the police presence in this city was way higher than it had been in the past. You could hardly walk down the street without seeing one, and while it was difficult to get used to that, it certainly wasn't easy to imagine any serious crime being committed while they were around.

"Now, let's head home... Oh, your little sister's hands are tired."

Mai thrust toward me a bag filled with the shopping for tonight's dinner.

"Yeah, yeah, I'll carry it."

I grinned and took the bag, while Mai nonchalantly slipped her hand into mine. Her cold skin caused me to cast my eyes downward.

Ever since I'd returned, Mai would hold my hand wherever we went. It didn't matter if we were at home or at school, she would suddenly link arms or touch me out of nowhere. She hadn't done that before.

Not that I minded, of course. It didn't make me uncomfortable, and it surely earned me big brother points, but...

We can't keep doing this...

My missing memories weren't my only concern. I was also worried about Mai. The sight of Yuuto's room had forced me to realize I couldn't keep ignoring her.

So I steeled myself and prepared to take the first step forward, come what may.

"...Isn't it about time you stopped doing that, Mai?"

"Hmm? Doing what?"

She cocked her head and looked up at me, puzzled. Yes, I know, it's very cute, but that's really not what I need right now.

I already felt like I was bungling it, but I pressed on regardless.

"You're not a kid anymore. Don't you think it's weird to hold hands every time we go out?"

I looked down at her hand, which now gripped mine even tighter than before.

I'd like to say it was out of affection, but somehow, I wasn't so sure. It seemed too strong for that.

"Not really," she replied. "We're brother and sister."

Her eyes grew dark. They certainly didn't look healthy.

"But Mai..."

"Shut up!! I don't...want to. Please don't let go."

She squeezed me so hard, I couldn't have released my hand if I wanted to. Like a mother ensuring her child wouldn't get lost.

...Or rather, like a mother who's already lost her child once and is making sure it doesn't happen again.

"If I hold your hand, I can't lose you again. Surely even a simpleton like you understands that."

"Mai..."

She glanced forlornly at the ground. There wasn't much I could say to that.

"...Right. Once we get back, it's dinner, followed by more studying. Let's aim for a perfect score on your retests, okay, my dear brother?"

"...R-right."

What could I say? It seemed like Mai would fall to pieces at the softest touch. So I kept my mouth shut and continued walking.

"It's time to study, dear brother."

After I got home, I'd quickly scarfed down dinner. Mai had fortunately inherited Dad's talent for cooking and not Mom's, and the food was great, as always. Then I'd taken a break before I went up to Mai's room to begin our joint study session. Unlike my own room, Mai's was always clean and smelled nice whenever I visited. I don't know how she did it.

"Er...sure, but what are you wearing?"

"Hmm? Something strange?"

Mai cocked her head, causing the lensless glasses sitting on her nose to rattle.

She was wearing a sand-colored suit, and the aqua-blue ribbon that was usually tied at the end of her hair, which fell to her thighs, was now fastened around chest height. Yes, my conservative and modest little sister had somehow transformed into an office-ready, career-oriented young woman while I wasn't looking.

Actually, when had she gotten changed? And *where*?

"No, no, it doesn't look strange. In fact, it kind of suits you."

"Yes. I'm well acquainted with your desires, dear brother. What was it that was written on that magazine you bought last week? *The Demanding Teacher and Her 24-Hour Private*—"

"Aaall righty, then. I'd say it's about time to get started, wouldn't you?"

I didn't ask. I wasn't listening.

"I can't say I approve of such racy literature, dear brother. But not to worry. I took everything that I could find and burned it in a big pile in the yard."

"I can't hear you! I can't hear you!"

I let the water of my heart seep from my eyes as I continued not listening.

"However, I am no tyrant, dear brother. I understand that boys your age can be insatiable in their lustful appetites. That is why I am prepared to dress in a way that pleases you. Well, what do you think?" she asked, nudging her shapely breasts upward with her arms.

"Please, why won't you stop?" I cried, my ears surely glowing red. "Do you think I have some kind of humiliation fetish?!"

What was I supposed to do?! She'd found my stash, burned it, and then started analyzing my preferences!

"Come, dear brother. It's time to start your lesson."

"...Yeah."

I'll tell you what I did. I sat at that desk and wept while my sister grinned, that's what.

"Hmm. I'm impressed, dear brother. You pass."

“Finally!”

I threw my mechanical pencil aside and collapsed onto my desk.

“Very good, dear brother. Here, I’ll stroke your head as a reward. There, there.”

I no longer had the energy to resist. I just let Mai do as she pleased. I almost commented on how it felt like she was treating me like a dog, but I managed to hold my tongue. I knew what she would say: *“That’s right, dear brother, you are a dog. I’ll always look after you and tell you what a good boy you are.”*

The worst part was, she would have been completely serious about it, too.

“Now then, there’s just one test to go. Shall we begin?”

“Huh?”

Just as I tasted relief, Mai casually summoned a new foe for me to deal with.

“You’re nearly there, dear brother! Just keep it up! 🎵”

Huh, that was odd. Through the tears, my little sister’s adorable smile almost looked like that of the devil himself. Strange, right? I thought this was supposed to be her greatest smile, reserved for only the most special of occasions.

“Now, while you take care of that, I’ll go make you a midnight snack.”

With an unbroken grin, Mai left the room, while I stared blankly at my desk.

“...I feel like Mai’s gotten even worse while I’ve been gone...”

I lay back in my chair, gazing up at the ceiling. The fatigue set in at last, and in the silence of the empty room, I muttered...

“Crap. What am I gonna do?”

Mai had undeniably been acting strange ever since I got back. On second thought, our lives had changed greatly even before I went missing. It was no surprise that she’d needed to adapt. It wasn’t so much the fact that she’d changed I was worried about; it was the *way* she’d changed.

She’s gotten way too attached to me. She’s like a cracked pane of glass.

I thought back to our walk home from the hospital earlier. As I’d held her

hand, I could swear I felt her shivering, as if she were possessed by a vicious beast of winter. A beast that couldn't be stopped. And try as I might, I couldn't shake the feeling it would tear Mai to shreds the moment I stepped out of line. I wanted to help my sister. I wanted to fix her. I wanted to mend her broken *heart*. But how? I couldn't even begin to guess.

"Haah... I know it's cliché," I mused, leaning back in my chair, "but perhaps all we can do is wait... Wh-whoa!"

At that moment, I pushed a little too far back and went tumbling out of my seat. But something strange happened. The entire world around me slowed to a crawl, and I calmly thrust out my hands, silently breaking my fall with only my fingertips.

"Whoa, that was close... Hmm? What's that?"

Now lying on the floor, I noticed something I hadn't before. A dark stain on the underside of the desk drawer handle that was completely invisible from above. My heart skipped a beat as soon as I laid eyes on it. The dark part of the stain tickled something in the back of my head, and I grew quite uneasy. It was on the middle drawer, the only one with a lock.

"...Hmm, unless Mai's changed where she hides the key... Ah, here it is."

I stood up and moved the pen holder aside to find the key, then used it to unlock the drawer.

I was neither seized by idle curiosity, nor did I have any particular motive to pry. It was just...for whatever reason, I was certain I had to know what was inside.

As I wrapped my fingers around the drawer handle, I felt a tingling sensation at their tips, as though they were being stabbed with thousands of tiny needles. Everything went cloudy with thick purple smoke for a moment, before returning to normal.

What am I doing? I wondered, but that didn't stop me from teasing open the drawer. And when I did...

"...Huh?"

At first, I didn't realize what it was.

"Wh...what? That's not... What...?"

It didn't feel real, seeing it there with my own eyes, but I couldn't look away. I picked it up, just to make sure. Surely I was just seeing things?

Then everything went dark, save for me and it. I felt dizzy, like I had been doused in a cold, viscous oil that spurted from the deep, dark hole in my mind. A paralyzing sensation swept through my mouth, as if to numb me to all sensation.

"...Mai... What have you done...?"

There was no response to my question. It was a knife.

With dried bloodstains on the blade.



"Good evening, my dear little sister. I wonder if you wouldn't mind taking a seat over here with me?"

"Hmm? What's all this about, dear brother?"



One night, after getting out of the bath and returning to the living room, I sat down on the sofa and gestured to the seat opposite the coffee table. Mai came over wearing a puzzled look, drying her hair with a towel. Her cheeks were slightly flushed with heat, and her skin glossy with moisture. Damp patches of her thin, aqua-blue pajamas clung to her skin, emphasizing the balance of her slender proportions. In fact, the contrast between her slovenly appearance and apparent ignorance thereof only added to her charm, in my opinion.

“...Ah, I see. Very well, I understand how teenage boys can get. You’re like a dog in heat. But if it will lessen the chances of you bothering someone else, then by all means, cast your amorous gaze wherever you please. I don’t mind at all.”

Saying this, Mai sat not across the table as I had indicated but cuddled up next to me on the sofa.

“I don’t think you have any idea what’s going on. And you *should* mind. Look, just sit over there; you’re in big trouble, you know.”

My little sister may have been the cutest in the world, but she was going to have to get up pretty early in the morning to pull one over on her own big brother.

“Hmm? Have I failed in my duties to be a charming little sister, Kaito?”

Mai pouted, trying to speak like a child. She was just going to ignore my request to sit over there, then.

“Listen, you...”

Mai had been slipping into “pamper mode” more and more these days. She had always been like this to some extent; whenever she reached emotional extremes, whether that was on days she was extremely happy or times she grew sad and depressed, she would reveal the lonely personality she usually kept hidden behind insults and abuse.

What this meant was that it was very obvious when she was mentally unstable, and it had been happening a lot recently. I was starting to think about taking her to see a therapist. I was sure it must be the cause of her clingy behavior as well.

I hesitated a little before answering. Mai was a wineglass balancing on the head of a pin right now.

“...You know that’s not it,” I said. “You’re as cute as a little sister should be.”

The source of my irritation was not the physical appearance of my sister, on the verge as she was of blossoming into a fine young woman. It was her dripping wet hair and damp clothes, the same as mine.

Now would be a good time to note that we lived in a normal house with a single bath.

“Mai, I believe you have gone too far this time. This cannot stand.”

“What? What cannot?”

“This idea you seem to have that our bathroom is for two people at once! Don’t come in while I’m in there!”

Yes, my little sister had decided my bath times were the perfect occasion to show her face. She’d justified this by claiming that extraordinary events might serve to stimulate the return of my memories, and there was nothing wrong with it unless I was an incestuous creep just seconds away from sexually assaulting his own sister. Her words, obviously.

However, now that I was reflecting on things, I realized I should have said something the first time it happened. It had started with a one-piece swimsuit, but the invasions were all accompanied by new outfits, each more titillating than the last. It all culminated in the events of today, which saw Mai intruding on my bath wearing only a towel.

I could let it slide no longer. I had to put my foot down before things got out of hand.

“But we used to bathe together completely naked,” Mai complained. “There’s no problem if we’re brother and sister, is there?”

“There is, there is! Where’s your sense of shame?!”

“So I can’t come in anymore?” she asked, lowering her gaze in a move perfectly calculated to leave no doubt how my actions looked.

“Absolutely not!!” I cried.

“Hmm. Well, I won’t risk angering you any further. I think I’ll go to bed.”

For a moment, her brazen attempt to flee left me stunned. “What? Hey, don’t run away on me! Come back!” I shouted after her. I reached out in an attempt to grab hold of her, but she deftly slipped away.

“I am not running away,” she said. “But we promised to go to the movie theater together tomorrow morning, and I wouldn’t want to oversleep. Nighty night, dear brother. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Without giving me a chance to voice my objections, Mai slid out of the room and went down the hall.

“...Haaaaah.”

After everything went quiet, I let out a drawn-out sigh. Suddenly overcome with fatigue, I fell over sideways onto the sofa.

About two weeks had passed since I’d found what Mai was hiding in her desk drawer, and I still hadn’t asked her what that bloodstained knife was doing there. I had been doing my utmost to pretend I hadn’t found it and make sure Mai didn’t discover I’d seen it.

I knew I couldn’t just sweep this under the rug, but I also knew that the moment I asked Mai about it, this peaceful life I’d worked so hard to recreate would all come crashing down—for good this time.

And the longer I left it, the farther I watched Mai walk down that hill, spilling tiny cogs and gears behind her.

God, I’m pathetic. I can’t even help my own sister.

“What am I supposed to do? Mom? Dad?”

I turned to their photographs on the family altar. Only after losing them had I realized how much they’d been supporting me.

All I did was run and run, never intending to stop and do anything.

Just then, our landline rang.

“...Hello?”

“Ah, I’m sorry to bother you this late in the evening. It’s Onishi with the Iizuka

police department. Would this be Mr. Kaito Ukei?"

I answered in the affirmative, and the young police officer loosened his speech a little.

"Would you happen to be free to meet tomorrow, Kaito?" came the detective's sunny words. *"You see, Miyagawa has just been in discussions with the higher-ups, and they've allowed us to proceed as planned."*

I thought back to the first time the two detectives had visited me in the hospital. They'd made quite a scene then, but they'd been back over the next few days to talk to me some more. As a result, I'd grown quite friendly with them.

"...I see."

I had asked Miyagawa to do me a favor.

The clothes I'd been wearing when I first reappeared at school had been confiscated as evidence. I wasn't allowed to take them home, but I had been shown the outfit in a plastic bag at the hospital. There was a damaged set of light leather armor, along with a cape so dark it seemed to swallow all light.

I'd felt a curious sensation in the pit of my stomach the instant I laid eyes on them. The clothes were important to me. Or at least it seemed to me like they were.

Though I didn't expect my request to be honored, I had asked the two detectives if they could arrange for my possessions to be returned. I figured if the old me cared about them so much, then perhaps they could help jog my memory.

"Ah, is tomorrow not good for you?"

"...No, sorry. I kind of have plans..."

"That's quite all right. I shouldn't expect you to drop everything at short notice. I simply thought I ought to give you a call as soon as possible."

"I'll come and get them this weekend," I said. "Give my thanks to Miyagawa, won't you?"

"Very well. I'll let him know. And apologies again for calling so late. Good

night.”

I returned the good-bye and hung up.

Then I immediately fell to the floor, cringing with guilt.

“Nnnnnng. What am I even doing...?”

Miyagawa and Onishi were both busy with the ongoing Rebirther cases. *There’s so many idiots out there, it’s hard to keep up*, I had heard them complain.

They were doing everything they could for me, and yet I had waited so long to make my request. Why? Because I had my hands full with Mai and didn’t want to think about anything else. I was being selfish, plain and simple.

“...Haah. Time for bed.”

I turned off the living room light and headed upstairs to my room. The bed creaked as I lay down in it and wrapped myself in my expensive duvet. My mattress, a perfect blend of soft and firm, seemed to suck all the exhaustion out of my body. It had been worth saving up for months to buy this.

“...”

Once I was fully relaxed, I turned my gaze inward and searched for my lost memories. It was the first time I’d done this since finding the knife in Mai’s room.

Even though I wasn’t as far gone as she was, I’d be lying if I said I was in a good place mentally. To be completely honest, I didn’t feel prepared to face the other self who lurked inside me.

I turned out the light and hid beneath the covers, emptying my mind.

I was sure it wouldn’t be long before Mai came silently over and crept into my bed, like always.

They say if you can fall asleep in three minutes, that’s not sleep, it’s passing out.

That bit of trivia I didn’t even remember reading came to me unbidden as I drifted off to sleep, hoping that whatever force of slumber gripped me, it would

not let go so easily.



“Listen to me, knave. How long are you planning to take?”

I was dreaming. Yes, I was dreaming. Before me was a vast, dark space that seemed to go on forever, filled with crowns of every shape and size. The surreal sight made me pop into vivid lucidity, and I found myself wondering that if this was a dream, then why couldn't my subconscious have come up with something a little more cheerful? I wanted to see a bright world that was open and free, the kind that only sleep could provide.

“What are you playing at?”

Suddenly, it felt as though I were melting into the darkness. From within the gloom came a man's voice.

Not a single ray of light penetrated the area, yet I could clearly make out the man's silhouette. His face, however, was cloaked in a veil of shadows. He sat atop a heavy throne, gazing down at me with crossed legs.

He was scrawny, with an unbroken, childlike voice, but I could tell from the way he spoke that he thought very highly of himself indeed.

...Who are you?

I got the vague sense that I'd met him somewhere before, as though he were a character from a movie or TV show I'd watched. I couldn't see his face, of course, but dreams rarely required visual detail to invoke such feelings.

“I am what you see. A part of you. I am the weight of your sin, as well as the strength to lift it.”

Oh, geez. So this is what we're doing, is it? Let me grab my robe and wizard hat.

I'd heard that dreams were a manifestation of one's subconscious desires, but this was ridiculous. Freud would have some damning things to say, I'm sure.

So my edgelord phase was determined to follow me to my grave, was it? Well, at least it was better than one more dark, vaguely depressing dream that told me nothing in the slightest.

“Ha, even with me, you play the fool. Determined to stay ignorant forever, are we? You’ve always been a coward, my lord. I should have expected nothing less.”

The part of me, as he called himself, scoffed. What did he bring me here for, to shame me to death? What a dumb dream. How did my brain come up with this stuff?

“Well, it matters not. I’m tired of waiting. Remember already. Free me. You don’t have time to idle around doing nothing.”

...I couldn’t say I understood what was going on, but I gathered that he wanted me to get my memories back.

“What lies beyond your closed eyelids is a new hope. You know that.”

Argh, come on, dream. You know I have my hands full with Mai right now. What’s the harm in putting myself off for a while to make sure she’s all right? Besides, I’m trying to remember, aren’t I? What more do you want me to do?

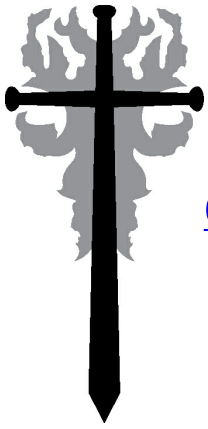
“You can hear the voice inside you, can you not? It’s been screaming this whole time.”

I know. I know!! I hear it every damn day, and I don’t know what to do anymore!

“Then don’t disappoint me.”

Though I couldn’t see a thing beyond the veil of shadows, I knew the figure was smirking. He was laughing at me.

“Or else you’ll lose everything you hold dear once again.”



CHAPTER 4

The Sound of Slipping Gears

It's time to wake up, dear brother," said Mai. "We have to get ready for our date. Come on, up you get," she said, rocking me awake.

"Huh...hmm? Mai? Urgh, I'm still sleepy... At least let me lie in bed until my alarm goes off..."

I rolled over and opened an eye to look at the clock. It was even earlier than I got up on school days.

"That won't do, dear brother. If I let you laze around any longer you'll be demoted from merely useless to an active waste of space. I can't let that happen to you. Can you at least try to be considerate of your little sister's feelings?"

"..."

"Big brothers who ignore their sisters get this."

"Gyaagh?! Ah, ah, aagh!"

She pinched my cheek. I cried out in pain, and Mai dragged me from my bed like a hooked haddock onto the cold, unforgiving floor.

"I'm going to get dressed, so hurry up and get ready."

"Okay."

After Mai left the room with graceful steps, I stood up.

“...What a weird dream that was.”

Vague scraps of information clung to my mind, leaving a bitter taste in my mouth.

“Argh, I just feel even more stressed now! That’s it, I’m not gonna think about anything today!”

All this overthinking had dampened my mood lately. I knew I was too dumb to come up with an answer anyway, so why bother?

That day, I decided to put it all out of my mind. That knife, my memories, everything. I was going to enjoy Mai’s date, head empty.

“Dear brother! Breakfast’s ready!” came Mai’s voice from the hallway.

“Coming!” I shouted back. Then I took off my pajamas and got dressed.

“Aah, what a nice film. That was so touching.”

“Touching? Did we watch the same movie?”

Out on the busy streets, my sister wore a cardigan over her one-piece dress, along with a beret and lensless glasses to obscure her identity. Meanwhile, I was wearing my casual clothes, plus a cap and sunglasses.

This was what we had to wear anywhere other than at school and at home. And I’d had to sit there dressed like an idiot while the cat and squirrel on the screen did nothing for three hours. That was why Mai’s assessment of the movie had shocked me.

I mean, it was literally just a cat playing with a squirrel. And why the hell did it have to be three hours long? What was the director thinking?

“You need to learn to be more sensitive, dear brother. That was a hidden gem. You don’t get to see many films like that these days.”

There wasn’t a hint of bitterness anywhere on her face. God, she was being totally sincere. There was no point in arguing; she was never going to be convinced otherwise. I guess the pitying look the cashier had given when she handed us the tickets meant nothing, too. And the fact that we were the only two people in the theater.

“Well, we’ve still got time. Want to go somewhere?” I asked.

“The pet shop, the pet shop!”

“Yes, yes. As you wish, Your Highness.”

Mai and I walked through the dense downtown streets until we arrived at a shopping mall that was packed with vendors. She was holding my hand as always, and I heard someone remark “*What a cute couple!*” as we passed.

We’re siblings, actually, but thanks... Damn, maybe I am obsessed after all.

“Welcome!”

“Look, dear brother, look! They have squirrels! Squirrels! Ah, and here’s a kitten!”

Her love of small animals stoked by the movie, Mai instantly got excited when looking at the pets on display. She couldn’t hide her delight no matter how much she tried. Aah, what an angel.

Yep, I guess I am obsessed.

“That kitten was just born last month,” said the clerk. “Would you like to pet it?”

“Can I?!”

“Yes, just be gentle, okay?”

Overjoyed, Mai picked up the tiny kitten in her arms.

“Look, dear brother, look! He’s so small and cute and fuzzy and adorable!”

Yeah, adorable. And the kitten wasn’t bad, either.

What was wrong with being obsessed anyway?

We stayed there for a while, and I admired my cute little sister stroking the cute little kittens.

“Aah, that was fun. There were kittens and puppies and hamsters and squirrels...”

“Isn’t that nice? I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“Let’s go here next, dear brother. I want to see if they have any good stuffed

animals!”

“W-wait, slow down!”

Mai grabbed me by the hand and pulled me into a novelty goods store that radiated a level of feminine energy that made me want to run for the hills. Everywhere I turned, there were teenage girls with their boyfriends, squeeing over the kitschy and cutesy merchandise.

“Er...umm...”

For some reason, a wave of guilt hit me, like I wasn’t supposed to be there. I knew why I was getting that feeling—it was like I was using Mai as a cover to infiltrate normie space!

“Are you thinking about something weird again, dear brother?”

“Hmm? Mai? *Mgh!*”

I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned around, to be met with a faceful of stuffed animal.

“I know that look,” she said. “It’s the one you always get when you’re lost in your neuroses. You know what they say: Overthinking will not empower you. You just keep your thoughts on me, and everything will be okay. Understand?”

“*Mgh, mgh, mghh.*”

Mai pressed a sheep plush toy about the size of my head into my face, using the legs to squeeze my cheeks. Then she popped her head out from behind it.

Aah, what a pleasant sensation. What an adorable little sister. Who could blame me for getting obsessed? She was just so cute, dammit.

After that, we played with some frog and cow sock puppets and messed around with hair clips. You know, I think I’m starting to see the appeal of normie stuff.

She’s my sister, you say? What’s that got to do with it? Oh, it’s the normie life for me. Who wouldn’t want to go on a date with such a cute girl? Even though we’re related. Because that doesn’t matter, you see.

“Well then, dear brother. There’s one more place I’d like to go. Would you

mind accompanying me?”

“Sure! We can go anywhere you want.”

“Oh, good. Then let’s go to that store over there.”

“Hmm? Which one is...it...?”

Acutia Lingerie.

The shop Mai was pointing at was a pinky, glitzy, no-clothesy store that no man could ever enter. Every one of my happy reveries was expelled from my brain at once.

“Sorry, no can do.”

“My, you sure did turn serious all of a sudden, dear brother. You should try smiling; it makes you look a little less ugly. Shall we go in, then?”

“No, we shan’t. Only dudes with maximum security in their masculinity can waltz into that store and come back alive. Are you trying to get me killed? What do you need me for in there anyway?”

“Well, you see, I went up a cup size lately, and I need something more comfortable to wear in bed...”

“AAAA. AAAA. AAAA.”

“...so I thought if I’m buying one anyway, it might as well be one you like, dear brother.”

“I was trying not to listen!! Stop talking!! Don’t you know the rules?”

“Don’t be selfish, Kaito. Do you want to end up a useless big brother?”

“Telling my little sister what bras I like is even worse! What you’re describing isn’t a useless big brother—it’s a sex offender brother!!”

I steadfastly stuck to my guns until I got my way.

I knew I never should have agreed to this. Or at the very least, I should have insisted on calling it a day out and not a date.

“One bottomless soda. Will that be all? The machine is just over there, so please help yourself.”

After relaxing for a second in the air-conditioned restaurant interior, I walked over to the drink machine and got myself a cup of melon soda. I'd managed to avoid the wicked dangers of the ladies' lingerie shop by the skin of my teeth after I convinced Mai to let me wander off on my own for a while. She'd said she would be an hour, and my task was to hold on to all the stuffed animals and accessories she had already bought until then.

"...An hour... That's a long time."

How on earth could it take an hour just to pick out some fancy bra and panties? I know it wasn't anything like buying men's underwear, but still.

"So much time..."

"Oh, you kids and your time. You'll wish you had spent it well when you enter the workforce, believe me."

It was Ms. Kawakami, in suit mode. She came over to my table and slumped across it while I slurped melon soda through my straw.

"Oh. Hi."

The scent of her sweet perfume was the only thing about her that reminded me she was a fully grown woman and not a child.

"I guess it's been two months, hasn't it? You after a scoop again?"

"Yeah, some idol drama that nobody even cares about. And before that, I wasted my time chasing up this rumor that wasn't even true, so forgive me if I'm a little under the weather today. You'll buy me some food to cheer me up, won't you?"

Ms. Kawakami sat down across from me as though it were the most natural thing in the world, spouting her childish request with the most brazenly mature-seeming smile I had ever seen.

"No, I won't. You're a grown up; don't you have your own money?"

"Oh, waitress! One rib eye steak meal, please!"

"...You aren't listening... And that's the most expensive thing on the menu."

Bossy as ever, I see. Oh well, she never did ask for that thirty thousand yen

back, so I suppose I could let this slide.

“So, what are you doing here?” she asked.

“Holding on to stuff my sister bought,” I replied. “So I have about an hour free.”

“Date with your sister, huh? That’s gotta sting.”

Sure, twist the knife, why don’t you?

“Oh, shut up,” I said. “I’m living the dream, enjoying the normie life. You’re just sad ’cause you’ll never spend your youth with a cute little sister like mine.”

“Er, but she’s your sister. It’s not like she’s your girlfriend.”

“...”

How did she call my bluff? This woman just stabbed me in the guts without a moment’s hesitation and tore my self-confidence to shreds.

I didn’t want to talk to her anymore. Ever.

“Well, whatever,” she continued. “So how goes the amnesia? Remember anything yet?”

“...No. Unfortunately for you, I don’t.”

“Hmm? Did I touch a nerve?”

“No... It’s just that I’m kind of on a remembering hiatus right now.”

“Huh...? What does that mean?”

I wiped a line of condensation off the side of my cup, letting it fall onto the crumpled-up straw wrapper. As I watched it gently soak the paper, I was surprised at how easily I decided to open up to Ms. Kawakami.

“...Honestly, I’ve been feeling like I’d be better off not remembering lately. I mean, it’s not like it’s going to help.”

It was as though it had taken voicing this aloud for me to finally accept my feelings on the matter. I could justify it any way I liked, but the bottom line was, I was afraid. I was afraid of allowing the *thing* that lurked within me to escape. Even for Yuuto, even for the police. Even if it would help bring this case to a

close.

“Instead, I want to be there for Mai. She’s had no one to look after her this past year, and it’s been really hard on her. And she’s been acting unstable ever since I got back. Whatever I’ve got going on can wait, can’t it?”

Still, I was telling the truth. Mai had nobody to lean on but me. My highest priority was making sure she was okay.

“Hmm, is that right? I would say that’s all the more reason to regain your memories, wouldn’t you?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“Well, if she’s so unstable, then you don’t want to be carrying this ticking time bomb around in your head, do you? Don’t you think she’s worried about you?”

“...”

I couldn’t respond to that.

“And you’re the only family she has left, right? She already lost you once, and with the case still unsolved, I bet she’s thinking it’s only a matter of time before you go missing again.”

“Uh? No, I...huh?”

“We might not know yet if your memories will change anything, but that’s no reason to pretend you’re better off not knowing, is it?”

“...”

Perhaps reading a little into my silence, Ms. Kawakami went on.

“...Well, who knows with you. But usually when people get their memories back, they find out it’s not as bad as they feared.”

“...Is that right?”

“It’s rough, I’m sure. Just stay strong, *big brother*.”

At that moment, the waitress brought Ms. Kawakami her food order.

“Here you are, one large rib steak meal.”

She placed the sizzling plate in front of Ms. Kawakami. The young journalist

clenched both fists and smiled to dispel the serious mood that had fallen over our table.

“And you, Kumiko. You keep your eyes on the scoop, all right? ♪”

A second later, I remembered that “Kumiko” was Ms. Kawakami’s first name.

“*Mmm*, that’s the stuff. I was just craving something filling like this.”

She sliced into the meat and took a bite. I still couldn’t find it in me to say a word.



Shortly after wolfing down her meal, Ms. Kawakami said her good-byes and left. I milled around for a while longer before going back to meet up with Mai, by which point it was late enough that we were both ready to head home. By the time we rode the train back and exited the ticket barrier, the sun was low in the sky and cast an evening glow over the city. Mai and I walked hand in hand through madder-stained streets.

“Don’t you think she’s worried about you?”

“Stay strong, big brother.”

My brief conversation with Ms. Kawakami resounded in my head.

Is Mai only acting clingy because she’s worried about me?

Mai had undoubtedly been less emotionally stable as of late. But what if it was anxiety causing her behavior? Anxiety over losing me again.

“Dear brother? Is something the matter?”

“Hmm? Ah, no. Just thinking.”

I glanced at Mai, walking alongside me. I felt something frigid in the warmth of her palm.

“...Do you feel better after today, dear brother?”

“Huh? Do I feel better?”

“You haven’t been yourself recently,” she said. “Are you worried about your memories returning?”

“Wha...?! How did you...?”

I gasped.

“I know these things, dear brother. Ever since you came back from the hospital, you’ve been acting depressed. You seem guilty over something you did to Yuuto, too.”

Mai stopped in the middle of the street with a worried look on her face.

“I think it’s okay not to remember if you don’t want to,” she said. “No matter what anyone else says, I will always be on your side. I never want to hurt you. And I’m sure whatever left you in that awful state, you never want to see it again. You can leave the case to the police. You’re under no obligation to remember anything for them.”

“...”

She’d seen right through me. Not only that, but she knew exactly what to say.

Mai squeezed my hand.

“You’re here now, dear brother. You can laugh, smile, think stupid thoughts, and make me angry. That’s the only thing I want.”

Right now, it was Mai who seemed like she might disappear at any moment.

“...I’m sorry, Mai. You’ve been worried about me, haven’t you?”

Goddamn, and to think I said it was all for her. Could I have been any more wrong?

Why was I like this? Always using whatever explanation I could hastily concoct to justify avoiding the truths I didn’t want to face. What a coward I was. For shame.

“But you don’t have to worry about me, Mai,” I said. “Whatever happens, I’ll always be by your side.”

Yeah. What kind of big brother would I be if I couldn’t even do that?

I turned and faced forward. There were certainly horrible things out there. This other self I hesitated to accept was terrifying beyond belief.

“Or else, you’ll lose everything you hold dear once again.”

I suddenly remembered the dream from that morning.

...This isn't the time to be scared. I've got to stop making excuses and grow a spine.

Tomorrow, I would resume trying to recover my lost memories. Once I did that and accepted my alter ego, I could put an end to the vague fears and insecurities that hounded me now. I could solve the case and make it so I never risked disappearing from Mai's side again.

I would stop running away. And that meant confronting Mai about that bloody knife, too. Everything needed to be put to rest before we could move forward.

At that time, that was what I truly believed.

"...I see."

And so I failed to notice...

...the expression on Mai's face as she gazed at the ground.



"Um...do I go like this?"

"That's right, very good. Then you just keep doing this..."

"Hmm? What are you two up to?"

We were in the shade of a stone on a grassy plain, underneath the blanket of stars in the night sky.

I had gone a short distance from our campsite to where I had dug a small hole filled with hot water. Then I'd immersed myself in the warmth of this impromptu open-air bath, letting the cool night air wash over me. Once I felt ready to pass out from dizziness, I exited the bath and returned to camp, where, in front of a small crackling bonfire, the two girls seemed immersed in an activity of their own.

"Ah, Master. We were just adding something to your armor."

"We've just finished! Look at this, look at this!"

Eyes wide with excitement, they showed me a flower design they'd stitched

onto the inside of my leather armor with a needle and thread.

“Embroidery? What’s that for?”

“For good luck! The daughter of that merchant we met today taught us how to do it!”

“Every stitch is made with our own hair, so it contains our feelings of affection. It’s supposed to ward off bad luck.”

“You used your hair to make this? That does sound like magic. Witchcraft or something— I mean...”

When I realized what I’d said, it was too late. The two girls despondently cast their eyes downward.

“Should we not have?”

“We’re sorry...”

“No, no, that’s not what I meant at all. It just reminded me of something, is the thing. I’m happy you made it for me, honest.”

When I said that, the two girls breathed a sigh of relief.

“But what do you mean, it reminded you of something?”

“Hmm? Oh, it’s just that charm is quite famous in the north. The last time someone made one for me, I was, like, ‘A charm from the demon lord’s hair? You sure it won’t bring bad luck instead?’ I got a real telling-off for that one.”

I smiled, remembering the scene.

“I should have learned back then. All I had to do was...this.”

“Whah...?”

“Fwah?!”

I placed both my hands on their heads, stroking their hair.

“Thank you. ■■■■■■■■■■. And ■■■■■■■■■■, too. There’s part of you in this armor now. I’ll treasure it always.”



“Drrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrring!”

A sound like tiny ball bearings rattled in my ears. I rolled over and stopped my alarm clock, before sitting up in bed.

“...*Haah*. Those two again. Ever since I saw that redheaded girl, they’ve been dominating my dreams.”

A week had passed since I decided to remember what I could for Mai’s sake, and I’d had similar dreams night after night. Endless snowfields, thick forests, jagged mountains, barren wastelands, and burning deserts.

I was always traveling. Sometimes alone, sometimes as part of a group. And the dreams were always first-person.

“Perhaps they really are my old memories...”

The contents of the dreams were fantastical, impossible. But assuming everyone wasn’t having a massive joke at my expense, then the circumstances of our disappearance, and of my return, were hard to explain. Maybe, just maybe, the locations I saw in my dreams were real.

“...If these are really memories from the time I was missing...”

Most were in black and white, and I couldn’t hear anyone’s voice. But some, like the one I’d just woken up from, were clear and distinct. There were voices, colors, smells, and warmth. Even tactile sensations of things I touched.

There were a few recurring characters in the dreams, all of whom felt deeply precious to me. But whenever I was about to hear their names, they would be drowned out by horrendous static.

“Who were those girls? What did they mean to me?”

I asked this question to the old me, whose presence was the only thing I could feel.

Those two were important to you, weren’t they?

If I really did get teleported to another world, I can see why I’d be angry. I’d do anything I could to find a way home. But you’re back now. Shouldn’t you be happy?

And even if that wasn’t the case, and you missed your friends from that world, wouldn’t you be sad?

“I just don’t get why you’re so angry...”

How many times had I asked myself that question? But now, as ever, the only response I received was a low growl, like that of a starving wolf.

“ ... ”

Still, it wasn’t just anger. There was more to the memories I’d lost than unbridled hatred. There were other emotions that escaped from time to time.

Once again, I’d learned nothing, but I was making progress. I could feel the rattling chains that bound the old me beginning to give. I knew my lost memories would return with just one more push.

“...Welp, if one more shove is all you need, then today’s the day!”

I clapped my hands against my cheeks to fire myself up.

Today, I was going to meet with those detectives and get back what belonged to me.

I arrived at the police station amid blustery winter winds. The only part of me that was still warm was the hand with which I’d been holding Mai’s; the rest felt so cold, I thought my skin would freeze.

“...My glasses have fogged up,” my sister said, removing her spectacles.

“That’s why I told you to wear sunglasses.”

“Sunglasses fog up as well, my useless brother. It’s just you don’t notice because they’re so dark.”

I let go of her hand and took off my sunglasses, along with the scarf around my neck. Then we went to look for a receptionist but ended up running into Inspector Miyagawa instead.

“Oh, Mr. Ukei. Sorry to make you walk all this way.”

“Ah. Mr. Miyagawa.”

“ ... ”

Mai seemed none too pleased to see him, after what had happened the first time they’d met. She cast her glance aside and tugged on my sleeve, which she had been pinching instead of holding my hand.

“Oh dear, seems the little miss has it in for me!”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” I said, patting her on the head before turning back to Miyagawa. “Were you coming to wait for us?”

“No, I just happened to be walking by. Though I have been waiting for you to show. The reception desk’s over this way.”

Miyagawa led us to the counter, where he explained the situation to the woman behind the desk. He filled out some forms, then said, “I might as well show you where the stuff’s locked up while I’m here.”

“Sure, thanks,” I replied.

He then took us down a hallway and began leading us through the building.

“There’s not many people here today,” I noted.

The police station was relatively unpopulated for its size. It was around lunchtime, so they could have been on their breaks, but I figured at least a few more policemen or office staff would be walking the halls.

“Yeah, well, there’s a good reason for that,” Miyagawa replied. “They’re all distracted.”

Miyagawa pointed at a dumb-looking poster on the wall that read ALICE KUROII
ACTING POLICE CHIEF FOR A DAY! 🎵

“Something went down at the event site,” he explained. “I’m heading there, too, after my break. An old man like me can’t catch a break around here, it seems.”

He sighed. As I took another look at him, he seemed tired.

“Have you been busy, detective? I’ve seen the police posted all around town.”

“Hmm? Aah. I guess. I know we got a lot of fresh blood, thanks to the hiring boom, but the more people we have, the less money and time there is. You don’t get nothing in this world for free, you know. So yeah, we’re still busy.” Miyagawa gave a bitter smile. “In fact, we only just found out about another kid connected to the case that went missing a few days ago. They weren’t exactly a model student, though, so we’re still trying to work out if they disappeared or just ran away from home. They’ve done it before.”

Miyagawa gave another grin, but there was very little cheer in it.

“Looks like you can’t trust the police to do anything. If you have time to complain about it, then do your jobs.”

“Mai!!”

“Nah, she’s not wrong,” Miyagawa said. “You got every right to blame us. The top brass are chasing the public’s trust, going after numbers and flooding the streets with rookies. But none of it matters if the people still get hurt on our watch. It’s bullshit.”

“...I wasn’t saying it was your fault specifically.”

“No, we haven’t been careful enough. I know we haven’t.”

“...”

Miyagawa shook his head, and Mai averted her eyes.

“Ah, but don’t tell the superintendent I said that, or I’ll be in trouble,” he said with a grin, dispelling the awkward atmosphere. Just then, we arrived in front of a door reading **AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY**.

“Um, are we allowed in here?”

“Just so you can get your stuff back. We’re making a special exception this once. That’s why I came to the entrance to find you.”

Inside was a row of metal racks, kind of like a backstage dressing room. On each of them were cardboard boxes, their contents labeled.

“Wait here for a sec,” said Miyagawa. “I’ll go get yours.”

We waited outside the room while he went inside.

Just then, I realized my palms were sweaty and my fists were clenched. My heartbeat was racing like crazy. Was I really going to get my memories back?

“Dear brother...”

“Hmm? What is it?” I answered calmly. But of course, I wasn’t calm. I just had to pretend I was. I had to be strong for my worrywart little sister. That was the kind of idiot I was.

Whatever I remember, I won't let it change me. I'll protect Mai. I won't ever let her cry again.

For just a second, I thought I felt a flame flicker to life in my heart. It was the ember of the old me. Over the past few months, I had come to understand something about him.

Though the old me seemed like a monstrous void at times, our motives seemed to align whenever I was instilled with the desire to protect Mai.

That was all I needed to know. To feel that the being of rage within me was not so far gone as to forget that. He was me. And I would never abandon my sister.

"It's okay," I said. "I promise you, whatever happens, I'll stay by your side."

"I'll hold you to that, dear brother."

The look in her eyes was faltering, insecure. I patted her on the head and faced forward again.

Once I got my memories back, we'd head right home, and I'd ask her about the knife.

I bet it's just a stage prop or something.

Come to think of it, why did I even assume it was human blood? I was jumping to conclusions. It could easily be fake.

For some reason, something inside my head told me it wasn't, but at least I was calming down enough to entertain the possibility.

"Sure," I said. "By the way, I have something to ask you about when we get home..."

That instant, a horrendous chill ran down my spine. I didn't know why, but it felt like an enormous snake had just lifted me up in its tongue.

"Hrk?!"

"Dear brother?"

Mai's worried question brought me back to reality. Everything looked the same, but I couldn't shake the feeling that the walls had grown spikes and were

closing in around me.

“Ah, there it is.”

Just then, Miyagawa found what he was looking for and lifted a cardboard box off the upper shelf. Time seemed to slow to a crawl around me, and I couldn't fathom why.

All I knew was that ever since waking up, I would get this sensation whenever I was in danger.

What was the threat here?

I didn't know. I didn't know. And before I could find out...

“Mai?!”

“Kai—!”

I hugged her on instinct, placing myself between her and where I thought the danger was going to come from.

The next second...

BOOOOOOOOOOM!!

...a blinding, searing white consumed everything, and an ear-rending blast swept the room. I felt a sharp object pierce my back before the eternal second came to a close.

“_____! _____! _____!!”

As the dust cleared, I checked to see if Mai was all right. Thankfully, it appeared my swift action had left her mostly unharmed. She was screaming at me in terror, but the blast had knocked out my senses, and I couldn't hear a word. I just wiped the soot off her cheek and said: “Thank god...you're okay...”

Leaving her with those words, I closed my eyes.



The madder sky tinted the world in red. And beneath it, a decaying ruin stood.

“Hey, Kaito? Do you remember the day we first met?”

“Yeah, I remember. Of course I do.”

"I remember what I told you back then. Do not touch me. Do not even come near. Stay right where you are. I guess you and I are two of a kind, a pair of fools. And look at us now."

"I can't help the fact that I fell hopelessly in love with you. Besides, ■■■■■■■■■■, it's your fault for being so darn cute."

"You buffoon! You nincompoop! You incorrigible fool! What kind of hero attempts to woo the demon lord? And what kind of demon lord returns it? To keep that up, even now, at the very end, will only make our parting even harder."

The red-haired girl before me mustered a weak smile.

"I would throw it all away and enjoy what little time I have left. What say you?"

"..."

My chest hurt.

Why? Simple. I knew what she was going to say next. And I already knew I had come here to refuse her.

"I'll do anything and everything I can for you. I'll give you half the world if I must. So please come to my side."

She looked like she might burst into tears at any moment. I had told myself not to give in, and yet even now my heart felt on the verge of cracking.

"Don't say it. I don't want to live like that. I'm sorry, but I'm selfish. I want it all. I don't want our life together to be destroyed, and I don't want to live with you knowing that everything will go up in smoke in two or three years! I'll...I'll find a way to rid you of that curse. No matter how improbable, I have to try!"

"Kaito..."

"I'm never going to give up. I can't just sit back and let you die, and neither should you! I'm not about to let you sacrifice yourself for the sake of the world!!"

You can't. It's impossible. It's too late. Give up.

There's nothing left. Nothing to save. Nothing to do except take her life with your own two hands.

You'll regret not taking her hand when you had the chance.

"I'll take you back to my world! We'll restore the great barrier, stop the fighting! You and me, together! Then we can live in my world, happily ever after!"

That will never happen.

"I'll introduce you to my family. Brag about you to my friends. 'Look at this cute girl I got to be my wife,' I'll say. Yeah, it'll be fun. Back there, there's no heroes or demon lords to worry about. We can be ourselves, and no one can tell us otherwise."

That dream will never come to pass.

"I can't live in peace not knowing which of our days might be our last. I was summoned to this world to be a hero, and that's just what I'll be. I won't compromise. I'll give everything I've got to make sure we can claim our happy ending. Nothing else matters to me. What the hell am I gonna do with half the world?!"

"...You always were a fool, Kaito. A hopeless, stubborn fool."

Why? Even in my dreams, I couldn't make it stop.

Although I couldn't remember what happened next, I knew it wasn't the bright future I was fighting for.

"Okay. I'll believe in you, Kaito! If anyone can save me, it's you!"

She wiped her tears and retracted her hand.

"Yeah, just trust me! Because I love you, you stupid girl!!"

"Make sure you come back!! I'll be waiting! And if you don't, I'll be sad!! And I love you, too, you big, stubborn oaf of a man!"

With that, we turned our backs on each other and started walking. The sky above was blood-red.

I awoke still not knowing what exactly I had dreamed of, only certain that it

was a very important dream. The color of the sky remained burned into my mind for minutes afterward.



The hospital was a fortress of white walls.

I faced my last checkup for the second time before being discharged.

“What are you made of, titanium? Are you some sort of killer robot from the future?”

“Uhh...I dunno. I’ve been quite surprised myself lately.”

“It’s just hard to believe you could suffer a blast at point-blank range and get away with only three days in the hospital.”

“Ha-ha... Guess I’m just lucky...”

“More like unlucky. If luck were on your side, you wouldn’t have gotten into this mess in the first place. It’s a miracle you even survived.”

Dr. Maeno gave a deep sigh. His assessment completed, he instructed me to put on my shirt.

There had been an explosion.

Supposedly, rats had chewed through the gas lines, causing a leak that was then ignited by static electricity. The blast set fire to the whole room, and it might have spread to the building, if not for the timely arrival of the fire department and the fact that the sprinkler system had been miraculously spared in the explosion.

At first, everyone thought there had been some kind of terrorist attack, but the police investigation quickly turned up the truth and put a stop to those rumors. Now they were dealing with the cleanup. The blast had occurred right in the middle of the evidence room, and decades’ worth of confiscated items were now blasted to bits, burned, or flooded. Even a layperson like me could imagine what a massive setback it was.

Still, my priority now wasn’t what had been lost in the blast but those of us who had been harmed.

Mai and I were lucky enough to get away with only minor injuries. No, scratch that—only she had been mostly unharmed. My entire back had been scorched by the blast, and bits of metal had gotten lodged in there. I must have looked like a porcupine when they wheeled me in. Fortunately, however, the shrapnel didn't hit anything important, and it had already been removed by the time I regained consciousness.

My sister had suffered minor burns to her arms and legs where I hadn't been able to cover her, but she was otherwise unscathed. Now, two days after the explosion, they had healed to the point where only a slight reddening of the skin remained.

I'd told Yuuto about what a good job I'd done in protecting my sister from receiving lifelong scars, and he smacked me upside the head. Even though I had a bandage on.

So even though I got turned into a hedgehog for a bit, it was way better than letting Mai come to harm.

There was one other problem, though...

"Um, how's the detective?"

"Still in intensive care, I'm afraid. He took a burst of shrapnel to the vitals. We're past the worst of it, but I don't believe he'll wake up for some time. At least another two weeks, I'd say."

"I see..."

Mr. Miyagawa had come out of it with the most severe injuries. The only reason he was still alive was because Mai had called for help immediately. However, he still hadn't come to. We weren't even allowed to see him.

"Your tests have come back clean," continued Dr. Maeno, "but please take care. And keep that head wrapping on until we next see each other, if you don't mind. Don't forget to put this cream on your back and change your bandages every day. You might be able to survive a gas explosion, but infections are no joke. Have your sister help."

"I will. Thank you."

I bowed and left the examination room, returning to my hospital bed. I was starting to grow used to this place. Not that I'd been here longer than two days this time.

When I got back, Mai was waiting for me, having just stuffed several days' worth of clothes into her bag.

"There you are, dear brother. I've just finished filling out the discharge forms."

"I see, thanks."

"Anything for you, dear brother. Now, let's go home."

Mai snugly linked arms with me and flashed a smile.

Her grin didn't look right to me. It was just like the one she used to wear when she'd been weak, sickly, and shy. A light behind fragile windows.

In fact, it was worse now than it had ever been. Her clinginess was borderline pathological.

I knew it...

Mai's mental state had deteriorated even further. Now it was difficult for her to spend even a moment away from my side. She was skipping school to stay with me at the hospital, and she never even went home. She'd brought enough changes of clothes to keep a constant vigil and bought food and drink from the stores nearby. At lunch, she was always with me, and she would wait outside the door when I needed to use the bathroom. Even when we weren't doing anything, she would hold my hand, and when we walked, it was always arm in arm.

I kept telling her it wasn't appropriate, but she showed no remorse, let alone a desire to change.

When I woke up and saw that Mai was spending every waking moment looking after me, I'd tried to get her to leave, but she refused. Her eyes just glazed over like a robot's while she hugged my arm and said "No."

Regardless of what I said, she just repeated "*No! No! No!*" over and over again, leaving me with no choice but to surrender to her whims.

I couldn't help but think that the broken doll that sat by my hospital bed was a far truer portrait of Mai than the girl smiling and clinging to my arm.

"Yeah, let's go home," I said.

How can I get her to go to therapy...?

I started walking, without voicing my concerns to Mai.

Now that things were this bad, I had to do something about it, even if that meant swallowing my pride. I planned on taking Mai to a therapist. This hospital was a decent pick, but for some reason I couldn't bring myself to trust Dr. Maeno completely, so I planned to take her somewhere else.

Perhaps it might help jog my memory, too.

Apparently, the outfit I had gone to the station to retrieve had perished in the blast. It was a real shame; although the odds weren't high, I had still hoped that seeing the items would lead me to recover my lost memories.

But if there was one silver lining to be gleaned from all this, it was that dream I'd had just after the blast took me out. It was the clearest one yet, and it seemed to come from a place very close to my heart.

However, now that I was so close, my urge to forget what had happened to me was as strong as it had ever been. The demon inside me was just a step away from freedom. Free of his shackles, only a single pane of glass separated him from the outside world.

And yet that final barrier was solid and sharp. It felt as though a single touch would tear my fingers to shreds.

I'd lost my greatest clue. And just when I'd made up my mind to remember, the final step revealed itself to be the brink of an interminable abyss.

It was all so close, yet so far.

I wasn't naive enough to think that a second medical opinion would suddenly lead to a major breakthrough, but I had to do something. Mai was getting worse by the day. I had to get better, for her sake.

"..."

My mounting unease swirled around me like a forest fire, licking at the edges of my heart.

“We’re home!” I announced to an empty house, knowing there was nobody there to hear it.

“...”

Even Mai didn’t say anything. I guess she’d gotten so used to living by herself that she’d fallen out of the habit.

Such a trivial change, and yet not trivial in the slightest.

“Man, I’m starving. I’m gonna go make dinner.”

“How about we cook together, dear brother?”

“Huh? What’s this all of a sudden? We’ve never done that before.”

“I’m just a sound-minded little sister who wants to cook together as siblings, from time to time.”

Mai smiled. Another calm and gentle smile that made my heart ache.

“...Good idea. Let’s whip something up together, then. I’ll wow you with my sick culinary skills, O sister of mine.”

I played the fool as always, trying not to break her heart. Besides, I was worried what Mai would do if I left her to her own devices.

“Tee-hee. I can’t say I hold out much hope for this alleged skill of yours, dear brother. After all, you’ve never cooked anything that wasn’t for home economics class.”

“That’s not— Huh, I guess you’re right. Well, that doesn’t mean I can’t peel some veggies or something.”

For some reason, I had been under the impression I could cook. I guess I must have picked it up during my blind spot. In my dreams, I was exploring another world, so it makes sense I would have had to feed myself, right?

...I didn’t think I would ever accept it, but ever since my memories started coming back, I’ve grown used to the idea that I was living in a fantasy world that whole time.

“Really? You sure you won’t cut your fingers?”

“Don’t underestimate my deft knifework, dear sister.”

Even though I could feel the demon inside me tearing free of his chains, banging against the paper-thin wall between us, I shrugged and laughed. I put down my things in the living room, and we washed our hands before Mai took a peek inside the fridge.

“What are we making?” I asked.

“Hmm, stew...? No, on second thought, curry.”

After sizing up my reaction, Mai changed the menu on the fly. I guess I must have given the game away. Curry would have been my choice.

...Why am I getting déjà vu? I guess someone must have usually cooked for me in the fantasy world, too.

I watched as Mai swiftly prepared two portions of ingredients.

“...You really are good at this, dear brother.”

“Not as good as you, though.”

As I stood peeling the vegetables beside Mai, even I was surprised by how natural the knife felt in my hand. But not as a kitchen tool. More like...as a weapon.

I...I hope I didn’t kill anybody...

It all felt too familiar. The sensation of inserting the blade at precisely the right angle, honed to the point I did it subconsciously.

I had a bad feeling about the actions of my past self, whose anger I was no stranger to at this point.

“...”

“Hmm? What is it, Mai?”

“Oh, I’m just a little jealous of your knife skills, dear brother. I’ve been doing this for a year, and I’m still not that good at it.”

“Heh-heh. What can I say?” I said with a little pride. “Maybe it’s time you

reevaluated my worth around here.”

I could tell what she was going to say. *“You mustn’t get too big for your britches, dear brother. Pride comes before a fall. Keep it up and you’ll be useless. Bad Kaito!”*

However...

“You’re right, dear brother. What a good job!” she said with a smile. Mai had complimented me for perhaps the first time in my life, and yet I wasn’t happy in the slightest about it.

“...Ow!”

As I was distracted, my hand slipped, and I cut myself. A line of blood dripped from my fingertip.

“Shit. Guess I spoke too soon. Mai, fetch the first-aid kit, would—?”

“Om.”

Mai bit onto my finger like a fish on a hook. I could feel her wet tongue on my flesh.

“Mmm...mmm...”

I stared in stunned silence as she sucked on my digit. Before long, she let go of my hand.

“Phah. All better. Now let’s put a bandage on it,” she said, walking over to the kitchen shelf and pulling the first-aid kit down. She fished around, pulling out a bandage, then stuck it on my finger.

“That’s what happens when you get carried away, dear brother.”

“R-right. Sorry.”

Mai had never done anything like that before. I wasn’t quite sure how to respond. Normally, she would have just run the wound under the sink.

“You know what, dear brother? Blood doesn’t taste half-bad,” she said, licking her lips.

There was a fragile, bewitching aura about her. She was like a single flower blooming by the river—something that you could crush between your fingers in

an instant.

“Ah, maybe it’s only your blood that tastes so good. I bet other people’s is like ditch water.”

“...Don’t be silly,” I said, flicking her on the forehead. “Stop talking crap and let’s get back to work.”

“Ow. That hurt. Kaito, you meanie.”

“Less talking, more cooking.”

With that, I went back to peeling vegetables. I was sure that Mai was having a little sulk, but I didn’t look. I didn’t want to look.

“ ... ”

And so I couldn’t say what expression she was making at that moment. All I knew was that while the curry we made that night turned out fine, to me, it tasted of nothing.

After dinner, I whiled away the hours like usual.

Actually, not quite like usual. At Mai’s insistence, I sat outside the bathroom while she took her bath. I couldn’t have one because of my back wound, so I wiped myself clean with a wet towel instead, then asked Mai to rub the disinfectant cream on it before bandaging it up. I thought about changing my head wrapping, too, but it had been reapplied at the hospital already today, so I left it alone.

After changing into our pajamas, Mai and I sat on the sofa eating potato chips, watching boring TV for a while before heading to bed.

“Should probably hit the hay, I guess.”

“All right, dear brother.”

Normally, we would each go to bed separately, before Mai would sneak into my room while I was sleeping after an hour or so. Her presence would always wake me up, but I’d pretend to still be asleep. Come morning, I would wait for her to leave before moving.

But tonight, that didn’t happen.

“Dear brother...do you think we could sleep together tonight?”

“ ...”

I wondered why she was suddenly asking permission for something she'd always done of her own accord.

“Sure, why not?”

“Great! I'll fetch my pillow.”

If sleeping together would help Mai deal with her anxieties, then I couldn't very well refuse.

She soon returned to my room, all smiles. I had already gotten into bed and closed my eyes.

I had school the next day. I'd use the time in classes to research hospitals on my phone.

“ ...”

I heard the door creak open. Mai didn't announce her presence at all.

“Turn the light out for me, will you?” I asked.

“ ...”

I'd left it on so she could find her way in the dark. But she didn't answer me.

“Kaito... Kaito...”

“Mai?”

“I'm not turning off the light.”

Mai slowly shuffled over to the bed, but she didn't get in. There was something deeply disturbing about the way she called my name. But when I opened my eyes and rolled over, what I saw made my blood run cold.

“Kaito... Kaito... You're mine, and nobody else's. You know that, right?”

I heard a *click* as Mai slapped a handcuff around my outstretched arm, chaining me to the bedpost.

“Huh? What?”

While I tried to work out what was happening, she took my other arm and both legs and cuffed them to the posts as well.

“H-hey, Mai? What’s going on?!” I asked, my eyes darting around in confusion.

I struggled beneath the covers against my restraints. I’m sure it would have looked hilarious to anyone watching, but to me, it was no laughing matter.

“I can’t turn off the light, dear brother. You won’t be able to see me if I do.”

“Wh-what are you talking—? S-stop it, Mai! This isn’t a joke! Did I make you mad? Just take these off, and we’ll talk things out!”

“I’m afraid not, Kaito. I have to make sure my useless big brother doesn’t try to run away. You’re always appealing to common sense and hiding behind it, but tonight, I’m not going to give up until you understand.”

Mai’s seductive smile was unlike any I’d ever seen. She tore the covers off me. Then she climbed on top of me, straddling my torso.

“Hey, what are you—? Mai!!”

“It’s all your fault, dear brother. You left me all by myself and went away with somebody else.”

One by one, Mai undid the buttons on her pajama top. The thin cloth in the center parted to expose her smooth, bare skin.

“Tell me. Who were they? Who’s ■■■■■■■? Who’s ■■■■■■■■■? Who’s ■■■■■■■■■? What were you dreaming about? Why did you say those names with such affection when they’re not mine? Why? Why? Why are you trying to leave me again?”

“Grhh?!”

When Mai said those names, they were drowned out by static, and a searing pain burst through my head, as though somebody had stuck their finger right into my brain.

Through the agony, I looked up at my sister, her face like that of a lost child about to burst into tears at any moment.

“You see, dear brother? You’re better off not remembering. Didn’t I tell you? You don’t need to hurt yourself. If you have the capacity to think, then never stop thinking about me. All you need to do is stay with me forever, and you’ll never have to worry about anything ever again.”

“Stop it...*rgh*...! I was just trying not to make you worry—”

Mai dug her nails into my chest. However, I could barely feel the pain over that of my splitting headache.

Her voice turned fragile and weak.

“Worry? Of course I worry about you, dear brother. Every single day, I worry that someone’s going to take you away from me again. I worry the man I see in your bed is just a dream. It’s terrifying, dear brother, so I need you to *cross the line with me*. Stay here and let me fill your thoughts. Let me drown out all your worries and fears, so you can finally be happy.”

“W-wait, is that why you tied me down?!”

As my headache abated, I found myself able to think clearly again. Mai wasn’t making sense, and my head still hurt, but what I was able to put together came as a profound shock.

“Mai, we can’t, we’re siblings...”



“Yes. And the big brother I know would never abandon his little sister after he spoils her for life. No matter what happens, no matter what you remember, you’ll never stop thinking about me, will you? If you leave me again, after all that, then... Hee-hee. Hee-hee-hee-hee! 🎵”

She smiled like a delighted child. What would come next if I left her, she didn’t say.

“You can’t be serious...”

“It’s okay, dear brother. I trust you. It won’t come to that. I know you’ll make the right choice. Whatever happens, you’ll choose me in the end. A little gratification to go with your feelings of guilt... Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee! 🎵”

There was no trace of a lie in Mai’s eyes. Whatever fucked-up things she was saying, she believed them. She’d gone off the deep end. How had I not noticed it before?

“This is ridiculous! Dammit! I’ll break these toy cuffs and—! *Rgh!*”

“Ah, you mustn’t struggle, dear brother. Those aren’t cheap, you know. I had to make sure you couldn’t damage them. If you insist on trying to leave me, then I’m afraid I’ll just have to teach you a lesson, won’t I? So why don’t you just lie still?”

“*Rgh.*”

The sound of her voice made me break into a cold sweat. Her eyes were dim and lifeless, and I didn’t want to know what she would do if I fought back.

“Now, dear brother. Let’s take off your clothes.”

Mai reached toward me and began unbuttoning my pajamas.

“Stop it. Stop it, Mai!”

“Nope! 🎵”

I tried to twist myself away, but I couldn’t accomplish much cuffed to the bed, so my resistance didn’t prevent Mai from undoing my buttons. Soon, my upper torso lay bare.

“Calm down, Mai! Think about what you’re doing!! This won’t make anybody

happy! ...Grh!"

"That just isn't true. I'll be very happy with you by my side, staring at nobody else, loving nobody else. I'll look after you, care for you, do everything for you. Won't that make you happy, too, dear brother? Nothing needs to come between us ever again."

"Think about what Mom and Dad would say."

"They'd be happy, I think. I still remember Dad's smile when I told him I'd marry you one day. He said it was okay."

It was no use. She'd lost the plot. She wasn't listening to me anymore. She heard the words, and she said things back, but she wasn't listening.

"Dear brother, which would you like first? A boy, or a girl? I always hoped for twin girls, myself."

Mai dropped her pajama top, revealing her black lingerie. I quickly looked away.

What now? What now, what now, what now? If I couldn't stop her, she'd traumatize herself!!

And if that happens, I'll never get her back!

I was out of time. I needed to make her stop, and fast!

"Don't look away, dear brother. Take it in. Everything. I kept myself slim and pretty for you. I never slipped in my routine, not even for a day. All so that I could be who you wanted when this time came. Ever since I was a little girl, I've tried to make myself grow into the kind of woman you enjoy."

"S-stop it, Mai."

"Come on, you big silly. Open your eyes. There's a long night ahead of us, and I don't want you to miss a second of it. Hee-hee-hee. Come on, open your eyes."

Mai wrapped her fingers around my cheeks. Her innocent, childlike laughter rattled in my ears.

"You're hopeless, dear brother. Just looking isn't enough for you, is it? You

want to move on to the next part as soon as possible...”

“M-Mai. Stop it! Mai!”

I felt her hands slide down my torso, and when I felt her fingers reach my navel, my eyes shot open.

Mai’s face was right there. She was so close, I could almost feel her breath.

I stared into her eyes. There, I could hear her screaming. Even though we were almost touching.

“You don’t have to do this, Mai,” I said. “I’ll always be with you, no matter what happens. You know that. I’m your big brother, for crying out loud!”

My cheap words fell on deaf ears. They didn’t even persuade myself, but I had to try something.

“Yes, that’s right. You’re my dear big brother, Kaito. That’s all you need to think about.”

All I had left was my trump card. But even I didn’t know what would happen if I played it.

“...Hey, Mai. If you really want me to forget about everything else, then can you answer me about just one thing? That’ll really put my mind to rest.”

“Of course, dear brother. Anything. What would you like to know? My measurements?”

“What’s with that bloodied knife I found in your desk drawer?”

“Ghh.”

It was like I’d truly cut through to her heart for the first time that night.

If I couldn’t bring her back, then I had to push her off. I wasn’t gambling for a lucky outcome; I was giving her the lesser of two evils.

“Ah...no... No...it’s not... How...? How do you know...huh? Why, why, why? D-don’t...don’t hate me, dear brother! I’m...I’m your little sister! Nooo!!”

“M-Mai...”

She tore at her long dark hair, spilling a stream of nonsense from her lips. Her

breathing grew shallow and labored, and her eyes lost their focus. She shivered uncontrollably, pressing her hands over her ears and sobbing.

“B-but but but! I couldn’t help it! The blood...the blood... Aaaaagh?! I’m not dirty, I’m not dirty. Stay out of my way. Why? How? It’s his fault. All of them! Aaaaaaagh!!”

“M-Mai! Calm down!”

As I watched her erratic behavior, I started to wonder if I’d made the right decision. Perhaps bringing up the knife had been a grave mistake.

No. I won’t get anywhere being timid. I have to talk to her. Make her change her mind!

“Mai. Calm down. Mai, listen to me. Let’s talk. I’m not running. Not from myself, and not from you, either! So let’s—!”

However, that brief moment of hesitation was all it took for me to lose my fingerhold completely.

“...Ah, I get it. They’re still in my way. Even now, they seek to take you away from me. I have to make sure they’re all gone before I go any further, don’t I?”

Just then, Mai stopped shaking.

“Someone’s leading you astray, aren’t they? That’s okay. Tomorrow, I’ll make sure they get what’s coming to them.”

She laughed. Another innocent, childlike giggle that seemed liable to shatter at any time.

“It’s okay. I suppose that’s just what I get for trying to leave things half-finished. Hee-hee-hee. My mistake. You’ll just have to wait there until later, dear brother.”

“Mai... Listen to me. Stop this. You’re tired. A lot’s happened, I get it. We’ll go to the hospital together tomorrow, it’ll be okay. I won’t tell anybody about the knife. We can—”

“The knife? What knife, dear brother? I’m going to make everything go away. You shouldn’t have any idea about that.”

“Hrh!”

It seemed Mai was wholly ignorant of the nonsense spilling from her lips. She spoke as though what she said was common sense, then gave me a kiss on the cheek, just like she’d done when she was younger.

“Hee-hee-hee. I haven’t done that in a while,” she said. “Wait here until tomorrow night, won’t you? After I’ve killed everyone, we can pretend it never happened.”

With that, she pulled her top over her shoulders and stood up.

“K-killed?! M-Mai, no! Who are you going to...? Stop!! Please, you can leave me tied up, just...let’s talk about this! You’re making a big mistake!”

Mai didn’t answer. She just turned out the lights.

“It’s time to sleep, dear brother. Tomorrow’s a very important day, and you’ll need your energy. Because by then, the only thing left in this world for you to care about...will be me.”

“Mai...”

She wasn’t listening to me again. She laughed, her cheeks red, and climbed back under the covers with me.

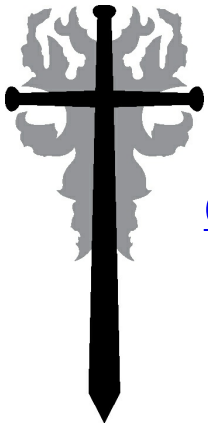
“Goodnight, dear brother. I hope tomorrow will be a good day.”

With that, she wrapped her arms around me and closed her eyes with a smile, quickly falling asleep.

I said nothing. I had bought myself a day but hadn’t managed to get through to Mai. I’d avoided the worst outcome but had failed to snatch the one I wanted.

It was then, in the dead of night, that the final thread supporting my little sister’s sanity snapped.

I heard a *clunk*, like the sound of slipping gears.



CHAPTER 5

An Unchanging World and a Second Fall

Well then, Kaito, I'll see you tonight," Mai said to me the next morning, after I'd spent an entire sleepless night tied to the bedposts.

I had hoped a good night's sleep might temper her outlook, but no luck. Mai still wore the same broken smile and refused to actually listen to what I was saying.

There was nothing I could do but wait silently as she fed me breakfast and left the house for school. I listened carefully for the sound of the front door closing, so that I could be sure Mai wasn't going to hear what I planned to do.

"Rgh, I don't have much time!"

I planned to break the bedposts to get free. Mai wasn't playing around. I thought of the bloodstained knife and counted myself lucky she hadn't decided to stab my arms and legs.

My sister was deeply disturbed right now. One wrong step, and she'd never be the same again. I had to stop her before she did something irrevocable, even if I had to tie *her* to the bed instead.

"I need to get out of these restraints before Mai comes back. Then I need to hurry after her!"

My wooden bed was one of Dad's old hand-me-downs, and unbeknownst to Mai, one of the posts was a little loose. If I could pull it off, I could escape quite

easily. With one hand free, I could reach the clicky pen by my bedside. Then I could use the spring from the clicky pen as a wire to jimmy the handcuffs open. I'd once been obsessed with this TV show about a jailbreak that I saw with Dad, so I'd taught myself how to pick handcuffs with a hairpin. It was actually surprisingly easy once I looked up tutorials online. It would take a little while, but I was confident I could do it one-handed as well.

"Here goes nothing... *Hrrrrrngh!*"

I pulled as hard as I could, and the wooden post just popped out. It must have been even more rotten than I'd assumed.

Trying to stay calm, I unscrewed the pen with my free hand, removed the spring, and stuck one end into the lock mechanism.

"Just a little more... Got it!"

The handcuff fell away. I undid the cuffs around my right hand, left leg, and finally, my right leg in the same manner.

"Damn, what time is it?"

I was worried I'd taken too long and whirled around to see that according to the clock by my bed, it was already past ten.

Mai told me to wait until tonight. But she also said she was going to school today. That means whatever she's planning on doing, it'll be there!

"I gotta move fast!!"

I didn't know what I was going to do yet, but I knew I had to stop Mai and bring her home. I threw on some clothes and picked up my phone.

"Who can I turn to...?"

Mom and Dad were no longer around, and I couldn't ask the two detectives, Miyagawa and Onishi, for help. There was also the hospital...but I couldn't lead Mai to Dr. Maeno in her state.

The only person I could think to call was Yuuto.

"Come on...pick up..."

Mai had not only taken *naginata* lessons, but also a little *aikido*. As shameful

as it was to admit, she could tie me in knots any day of the week. I needed someone on my side.

As I waited for Yuuto to pick up, wondering why he wasn't answering, I put on my shoes and ran out the front door...

"Ah, Mr. Ukei. I was just about to knock."

"Inspector Onishi?"

The police detective was standing right outside my house, his black car parked on the street behind him.

"We need to talk," he said. "Do you have a minute?"

"Uhh, sorry, I'm a little busy right now. Can this wait?"

"Hmm, not really. Could you make time, do you think? It's quite urgent."

I was a little surprised by Onishi's uncharacteristic insistence.

"Um, well, I'm sorry, but I really can't right now...," I replied. I didn't know what this was about, but the only thing I was making time for right now was Mai.

"That's a shame. There's no time. What if I told you your sister's in danger? I think you'll regret not hearing what I have to say."

"Wh...? What do you mean by that?!"

Onishi looked gravely serious. *Maybe I should hear him out after all*, I thought.

"We're short on time. Join me in the vehicle over there, where we can speak privately."

"Just tell me right here!"

"I can't. We're wasting time. If you want to save your sister, then shut your mouth and come with me."

He didn't seem to be lying. Not that I could think of a single reason he would. Miyagawa and Onishi had both earned my trust. Perhaps Mai really was in danger after all.

...rrrr. Bip. "The number you have dialed is not available..."

I heard my call go to voicemail.

“...Okay,” I said. “I will. But do you mind if I leave a message first? My friend might want to get back to me.”

“Of course. Go right ahead.”

Onishi nodded, and I left a message, saying, *“I can’t explain now, but give me a call when Mai’s not around.”*

“All right,” said Onishi when I was done. “Now get in the back.”



“C-come on! Will you tell me what’s going on already? Where are we now?!”

We had been driving for about an hour. I’d begged Onishi to explain the entire time, but he never said a word. As I watched the scenery become more and more rustic and unpopulated, I began to grow suspicious. When at last he stopped the car and got out, we were in what looked like an abandoned factory in the countryside.

I’d had enough of him dodging my questions and demanded an immediate explanation.

“Is this your definition of somewhere private? We’re in the middle of nowhere!”

“Well, you can’t get more private than that, can you?”

The place looked like a deserted aircraft hangar and was cluttered with machines so old and rusted it was hard to discern their purpose.

The roof had partially collapsed at one point, crushing several of the machines with debris and leaving a hole in the ceiling from which sunlight filtered through.

Onishi immediately walked over to one of those crushed machines and started moving rocks out of the way, attempting to unearth something.

“What...?” I asked, dumbfounded. The air was full of dust, and it was obvious that no one had been here recently. I had to admit that Onishi had a point about privacy, but I wasn’t convinced this whole ordeal was necessary.

“What about the police station? That would have done just as well!”

“Not so, I’m afraid. Our enemy has eyes and ears there.”

“Enemy? What do you—? No, you know what, just tell me about Mai!”

“Hmm? Aah, that. Are you sure you want to know?”

Onishi didn’t even turn away from his work, hunting through the debris.

“Wh-what?! Why the hell do you think I agreed to come here?! And what are you doing over there anyway?!”

“Just a second, please. Ah, there it is.”

“I thought I made it pretty clear I was in a hurry, didn’t I? If you’re not going to talk, then take...me...”

“Just a second, I said.”

I felt an abrupt dull pain in my leg that quickly spread across my body. Onishi had retrieved what he was looking for, a black contraption of some kind, and turned back to me.

“Huh? Wh-what’s...that...?”

“Why, a bowgun, of course. Or perhaps ‘crossbow’ is a more familiar term? I just used it to shoot you in the leg.”

He shot me. He shot me. He shot me!

I looked down to see a black stick about the width of a marker pen, and a stream of blood running down my ankle.

And as soon as I realized what I was looking at, the shock subsided, and the pain hit me full force.

“Agh! Aaaaaaaggghhh?!”

“Everyone screams at first. It’s enough to wake the dead, for crying out loud.”

“Ghh! Grgh?! Gaaaaaagh!!”

Another shot whizzed through the air, landing in my other ankle. Unable even to stagger, I immediately fell backward onto my rear, and then onto my side. The pain was so unbearable that it seemed like my eyes were going to turn back

in their sockets. As I struggled to maintain consciousness, my addled mind brought only a single question to my lips.

“Rgghh! Why...?”

“I promised to bring you back alive this time, and I can’t have you running away,” Onishi explained. “I have a feeling there’s more to you than meets the eye, so I needed to make sure you couldn’t fight back. Security’s been tight recently, and I wasn’t able to get my usual drugs. So I came here to retrieve the weapon I stashed away for a rainy day. A shelter for every storm, as they say.”

Onishi patted the metal frame of his crossbow as he spoke. My eyes grew misty through the pain-induced tears, but Onishi went on speaking without a shred of affectation.

“Now, you asked me why I brought you here. I guess I’ll enlighten you while we wait for my client to arrive.”

Onishi whipped out a cigarette and placed it in his mouth, dexterously lighting it with only one hand.

“Though there’s not much to say, to be honest. You see, I do a few odd jobs and favors here and there, in addition to my public sector gig. My client asked me to deliver you to them alive, before the police got to you.”

“Wh-who? And...before the police got to me? Wh-what do you mean?”

The pain was so intense that my senses were going dull. Fortunately, that caused the pain to abate somewhat. Or perhaps my leg itself was going numb. Either way, it allowed me to talk.

“I’m surprised you can speak,” said Onishi. “Is that the adrenaline kicking in, I wonder? Well, no matter. Since you took great pains to ask, I suppose I can answer. I don’t need to tell you who my client is—you’ll meet them soon enough. As for why the police are after you, I can certainly tell you that. You inconvenience them, you see, and so does that big-mouthed detective. That’s why they tried to kill you both with that little ‘gas explosion.’”

“Wh-what? What?”

The words circled my ears, as though my brain didn’t want to take them in.

Yet they seeped through my skin like poison, a hundred knife blades jutting into my heart.

“You see, the government wanted that cosplay getup you reappeared in. A treasure trove of technology, they called it. But Miyagawa refused to hand it over. He thought it was the key to unlocking your memories and cracking the case. Plus, there’s been a lot more Rebirther activity since word got out about you, hasn’t there? The department decided to get to you first to kill the both of you and make it look like an accident, while snatching your confiscated items in all the fuss. Poor Miyagawa, always the fool,” he added with a shrug.

...What the hell is going on? Is this a joke?

It all sounded so audacious that I wondered if the pain wasn’t causing me to hallucinate. And yet somehow, it felt like I’d heard it all before.

“It’s stupid, if you ask me. And look, they got the items they were after, but they didn’t manage to kill either of you. A half-baked plan leads to a half-baked outcome, that’s what I say. Anyway, that got my client panicking, so they asked me to bring you as quickly as possible. This was originally supposed to happen next week, you see, but I was contacted last night and told to move it to today. Not that you’ll hear me complaining. I get to charge my emergency rates just for getting one dumb kid to shut up and come with me.”

“...Grhhhh!”

I was starting to lose the plot of what Onishi was saying. The pain had crossed a threshold, and my mind was beginning to blur. However, for some reason I couldn’t explain, I was getting the same headache as I would when I tried to remember my past.

The bottom line was...I was sold out...?

“The original plan was to get your sister as well,” Onishi went on, “then use her as bait to lure you in. But just as I was ready to act, my client told me to ignore her and take you alone. It’s just not fair, is it? I worked on that plan for days, and to see it all go down the drain is just...well, it’s a bummer. Still, I asked for three times my usual rate on top of an urgency fee, so I can’t complain, can I? Jackpot.”

Onishi chuckled to himself like a hyena. All I could tell was that he had been close to kidnapping Mai.

“...a...e...”

Shut the fuck up. Don't touch her.

That's what I wanted to say, but my throbbing head reduced me to a hyperventilating mess, unable to get out a single word.

“Stay right where you are,” said Onishi. “We can talk, but I can't let you struggle.”

“Ggh?! Rrghh!!”

As soon as I tried to stand up, there was another whistle from the crossbow in Onishi's hands, and a third agonizing spike landed in my right leg. Just as I was beginning to fall into a numb stupor, the shock threw my eyelids wide.

It hurt. It hurt. It hurt.

The pain of Onishi's merciless crossbow bolt. My splitting headache. The humiliation of having fallen for his lies so readily. It all mixed together to fuel a flame in the pit of my heart.

“...I...trusted you... You...betrayed me...you bastard...”

And to think I had thought of his name when looking for someone to rely on. What a joke.

“C'mon now,” Onishi said. “I feel for you, believe me. All your friends and family bit the dust, and now there's some psycho after you who thinks they can travel to other worlds. It's just so sad, you know?”

But he showed neither sorrow nor glee at my plight; he only gave a slight frown, like he was considering what to have for dinner.

“But still,” he went on. “It's only business. Nothing personal. I mean, the only reason I spoke to you in the first place was because I thought it might make the job a little easier. That's hardly a betrayal, is it?”

I felt a crack, as if my head had just split in two, ear-to-ear.

This had happened before.

They'd betrayed me. They'd taken everything away from me.

I detested them so bitterly that I'd needed to forsake my sanity just to look them in the eye.

And when I'd lain before them, facedown in the dirt, I'd made a vow. I had. It had always been right here with me.

That was why the simmering force inside me exuded such animosity.

What have I been doing...?

"Well, you'll probably be dead by then, but if it's any consolation, your sister will be along soon. No doubt I can get her with the same trick I used on you."

He laughed, a spiteful ringing in my ears.

The pain racked my skull, eliminating my ability to think and transforming my emotions into dripping magma, mixed with an uncontrollable, growing fury.

"...you."

This man wants to hurt Mai.

"Hmm? You say something?"

The magma filled the innermost reaches of my heart, just as it had always done. Yes, it had been a part of me for so very long now.

"...ll you."

This man wants to take everything away from me.

"Speak up. I can't hear you when you mumble to yourself like that."

Hot. And viscous. And dark.

I knew what that magma was. It was the grounds on which I'd once sworn a solemn vow.

"...kill you."

As soon as I said it, the scorching earth filling my body cried out, like a pot of boiling water threatening to bubble over.

"Oh yeah, yeah. You'll kill me. That's what everyone says. Sore losers, all of you. You know what, I'm not sympathetic anymore. I try to throw you a bone,

and this is the thanks I get?”

I finally remembered. It was all coming back. This fury, this hate; it was my very oath made manifest. The chains that bound me to the task I’d sworn to complete.

“I remember now. I’m...”

“Hmm? What do you mean, you rem—?”

“I swore an oath. I promised to kill every last one of you.”

At that moment, something snapped.

“Huh? Excuse me? Have you lost it?”

“Yeah, I’ve lost it. A long time ago, actually. I just forgot about it.”

With my oath regained, my splitting headache vanished, and the sordid memories of my past life came bubbling up between my brain cells like mud.

I recalled the time I’d spent as a hero in a faraway land, warring with the demon lord and her dark armies in search of a way home. I remembered the day I’d wept for Leticia, and my inability to save her. I remembered my betrayal, and the oath I’d sworn to those who wronged me. I remembered the day I’d died, and I remembered my miraculous rebirth. I remembered my new partners in crime, the inimitable duo of Minnalis and Shuria. And I remembered that there were still those in that world I had sworn to kill.

I rose to my feet and stared upward.

“Just look at that sky...”

How many times had I lain in the gutter like this, gazing at the stars? Of all the blunders I’d made, this one had to be in the top five.

The very first thought I plucked from the whirling maelstrom of my mind was...

“Guess I’ve given Leticia one more reason to be upset.”

She’d once told me I was to think of her and cry when I returned to my world. I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten that. I’d forgotten about my unfinished business. I’d forgotten about the two partners in crime I’d left behind. I’d forgotten

everything and lived a carefree life.

I'd lost the searing oath I branded upon my soul, afraid to look because I was scared of what I might find.

"I really am pathetic. What have I been doing this whole time...?"

I clenched my teeth and grimaced. It was my own naïveté that was to blame, an old habit I just couldn't shake. Whenever I was faced with something I didn't want to deal with, I just put it off, pretended I didn't notice. That habit had led to my downfall once, and now it had done so again.

But he'd said that after me, my sister was next.

"...You must be a real adrenaline junkie if you can still stand after all that. Guess it's better than screaming your lungs out."

I turned my gaze upon Onishi, who had nonchalantly lit a second cigarette.

"You know, like that other girl, what's-her-name. Your sister's friend...oh yeah, Yuuki. She was a real crybaby, let me tell you. I had to bring her in alive, so I went to tie her up, and what did she do? She scratched the back of my neck! Can you believe that? Of course, when Miyagawa saw it, he laughed and said, *'Did a woman do that to you?'* so I had to be careful after that. That girl was a real piece of work, let me tell you."

"...Ah-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Wow, you're a real selfish bastard, aren't you? I know somewhere you'd fit right in."

Unlike Dr. Maeno, there was no trace of malice in Onishi's words. No murderous glee, no rage, and no guilt. He was just the kind of cold-blooded killer Grond would have died for. There was no way I ever could have spotted the evil in his eyes when it hadn't been there to begin with. At least, not without my memories and all the painful experiences therein.

"Selfish bastard? That's a little harsh, wouldn't you say? I mean, who wouldn't do what I did for the amount of money I was offered? We're talking tens of millions, kid. Just for a little kidnapping and corpse-ferrying."

Onishi's speech was completely genuine. He seriously believed that he was in the right, and that his behavior was only logical.

“Man, and I thought this world was supposed to be the good one. Why do I always seem to get the assholes? Like attracts like, I guess,” I spat.

“You just don’t get it, do you? It’s all about the money. You know how many years I’d have to work to save up this kind of cash? A student like you just wouldn’t understand, I guess.”

I couldn’t believe how proud the man looked while spouting such a clichéd ideology. He couldn’t have failed to realize my transformation, but it probably didn’t bother him, seeing as how he still held all the cards. Or at least he thought he did.

Still, he wasn’t relaxing his guard, and he was still keeping his crossbow trained on me. He hadn’t taken his eyes off me for an instant. I’d read somewhere online that the most heinous killers always seemed the most normal at first glance. I could believe it, because if Onishi was anything to go by, they truly believed they *were* normal.

“So tell me,” he went on. “You said you remembered. Does that mean you got back your memories of what happened after you disappeared? Did you really go to a parallel world or something?”

“Yeah, I did. I remember everything that happened there.”

“Wow, that’s neat! Tell me, what’s it like there? Is there, like, magic and stuff? That’s what my client said. They think they can use you to somehow get magic in this—”

“It’s exactly the same as this one,” I said, interrupting him. “It’s beautiful and dirty, filled with all kinds of people, with just enough good to outweigh the bad—exactly the same as here.”

“...No, no, no. That’s not what I mean. What I’m trying to say is...”

Onishi tried to rephrase his question, ignorant of what I’d just done.

“...It’s exactly the same,” I repeated. “Exactly the same people, and exactly the same ways of breaking them.”

Onishi froze, dumbfounded.

“Huh? What?”

His crossbow fell to the floor, along with the hand that held it.

There was a lengthy pause.

“See? Even hands come off in the same way.”

“Aaaaaaaaaghhh?!”

Onishi’s red stump spurted blood, staining the white bone and pooling on the ground.

“And you even bleed the same color.”

“Blood? Blood! Aaaagh?!”

Onishi’s confidence of only a few moments prior had completely drained away, along with all the blood from his arm, as he desperately clutched his other hand over the wound.

“I’m dying. I’m dyiiiiing!!”

“Hah. Even the way you gutter trash squeal is the same.”

It was music to my ears. The screams of a disemboweled pig who’d tried to steal everything I held dear.

But I couldn’t let him bleed out and get off so lightly.

“Don’t worry, you won’t die...yet.”

Grunting through the pain, I pulled the crossbow bolts free of my legs. Then, with a little more trouble than I was used to, I conjured up the Nephrite Blade of Verdure.

“...O sacred protectors of the forest, whose voice travels on the wind as it whistles through the leaves, whose power is channeled through great boughs. Come to me. *Verdant Healing*.”

Its soft light sealed my wounds and stopped the bleeding. To Onishi, that light must have seemed akin to that of heaven, appearing by the grace of God to grant him salvation.

“Is...is that...magic?! U-use it on me, please!!”

“Heh. Guess humans aren’t so different after all, no matter what world we’re

from.”

Onishi reacted exactly as I’d predicted, changing his tune immediately when presented with a chance at life. I felt the black water fill the cup of roaring flame in my heart.

“Wh-what are you doing?! You said you would let me live, didn’t you?! Hurry up and heal me already!!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha!! Who do you think you are? I think you’ve got the wrong end of the stick.”

“Eep?!”

Standing up on my healed legs, I glared down at Onishi, who was now kneeling in pain on the floor.

“You don’t seem to have realized it yet, but the place you now stand is the mouth of hell.”

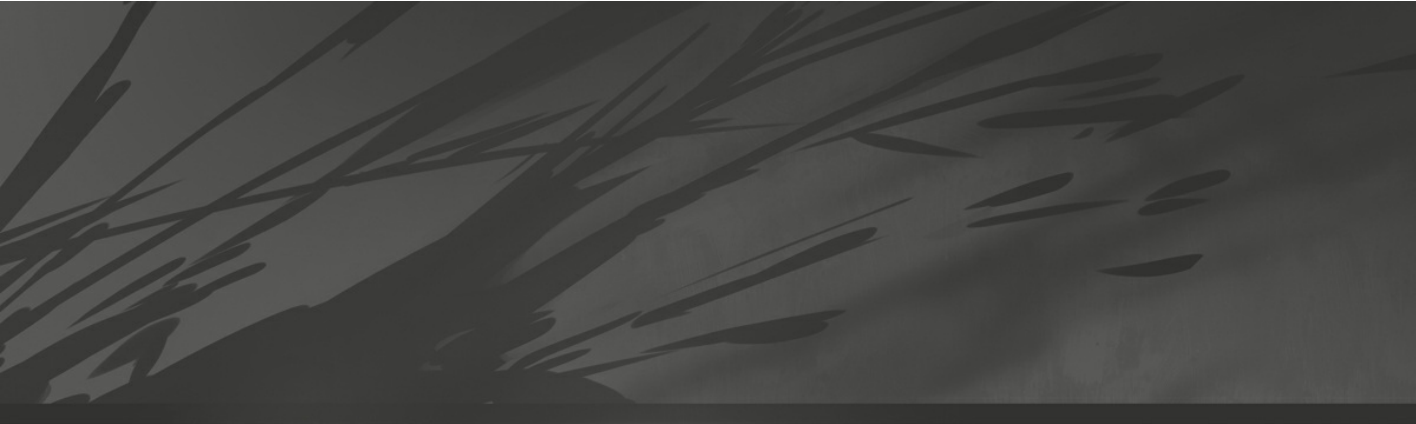
“Huh?”

I conjured up the Flaming Sword of Wheels, which consisted of a simple hilt with a blade formed entirely of fire. Channeling mana into it made the flame burn so hot that it would instantly char everything it passed through.

I sliced Onishi’s arm again at the elbow, searing the wound closed. His severed forearm fell alongside his hand from before.

“Gaaaaaaaaaagh?!”

“See? That stopped the bleeding, didn’t it? Now I can keep cutting off your limbs without it killing you. Oh, come on. Don’t pass out now.”



“Hgragh?!”

I grabbed Onishi by the hair and pulled him up.

“F-f-f-fuck you!! Put it back! Put my arm back!!” he whined, clearly no longer in control of the situation. He extended the stump of his upper arm and yelled at me with such anger, I began to wonder if he’d already forgotten the pain. “You know what I’m gonna do to you for this?! I’ll kill you! I’m gonna kill you! Then I’ll get your sister and your friend, and I’ll sell them to— *Ghgh?!*”

“Like I said, you’re under a simple misconception here. Besides, what did you just say? Are you fucking stupid? Do you want to die? Is that it? If that’s the case, then just say so.”

“Grh...gggh...?!”

I pressed his face into the floor, twisting it so the rough concrete scraped the skin off his face like a file. He resisted at first, but once I felt his neck go limp, I lifted his head up once more.

“Now, let me ask you some questions,” I said. “If you hesitate, or lie...well, I’m sure you can imagine what will happen, right?”

“Hrk?!”

I stared into Onishi’s face, filling him with terror. He was a little easier on the eyes now that his face was sliced up.

“Still, if I consult my memories, I have a pretty strong hunch...but I’m not sure. I guess it could be someone I’ve never met before.”

“I’ll talk! I’ll talk! Just please stop!”

“All right then, why don’t we start with who’s behind all this?”

“Kawakami! A reporter lady named Kumiko Kawakami! She’s the one who asked me to—”

“Hmm, yeah, that’s what I figured.”

I wasn’t all that surprised by the name that fell from Onishi’s lips. In hindsight, it was strange how she’d managed to sniff me out despite the fact the police were concealing my existence, not to mention how she’d managed to track my

every move. Plus, there had been subtle giveaways in her expressions and mannerisms that pointed to her ulterior motives, the significance of which I could only perceive now that I had my memories back.

Of course, analyzing my recollection like that was flaky business, so I couldn't be sure. I still had an inkling Dr. Maeno had something to do with everything.

Then again, if he's the mastermind, he's a pretty shitty one. He was way too obvious.

"Right, then next... Huh. I guess that's it, actually."

Now that I thought about it, the only thing I'd needed to confirm was the identity of Onishi's "client," which he had just done. It would be far quicker to ask Ms. Kawakami about the rest, rather than try to wrangle any more information of dubious quality from Onishi. Even with my memories back, I still didn't want to leave Mai alone for any longer than absolutely necessary.

Perhaps Onishi realized this, as his face grew even more twisted with dread.

"Eep! L-let me go, I'm begging you. I was only kidding! I won't touch you or your friends ever again!"

"Me? Let you go? You're joking, right?"

Naturally, I had no intention of showing mercy to my foes. Flinging my empathy from the precipice, I kicked him to the floor and made my soul blade flicker brightly with flame, then slashed at his ankles and lopped off his feet.

"Grgh?! Gaaaaaagh!!"

"I think we're way past the point of forgiveness now, don't you?"

He'd tricked me. He'd hurt my sister and my friends and abetted in their murder, at the very least. But worse than any of that, he said he was going to hurt Mai again. That made him my enemy. Someone who stood in my way, who sought to destroy the world I held dear.

He'd destroyed Mai's world already, and so I needed to destroy his in return.

"Hgggh! Ghhheh?!"

"Die, die, die. There's no salvation for the likes of you."

I hacked left and right, like a swinging pendulum biting into his flesh, slicing Onishi's legs to ribbons. Burnt chunks of flesh scattered across the floor.

"Not very imaginative, I know. Usually, I'd take my time with this sort of thing, but unfortunately you caught me on a bad day, so I'm just kind of winging it."

"Please...stop...help...me..."

"Sorry, not gonna happen. Nobody's coming for you. Did anybody come for the people you helped kill? I think not. Your price was ten million yen, was it? Well then, the penalty for failure has to be worth that much as well."

In my other hand, I summoned the Sword of Earthbound Wyrms and extended its area of effect across the concrete floor, extracting the iron in the ground to create a coffin for the armless, legless Onishi. The floor of the factory began to collapse like a sinkhole, and above it, a silver box about a meter across formed.

"So die," I said. "Die in remorse. Die in pain. Die in despair."

I picked up the scattered pieces of Onishi's limbs and threw them into the box. Then I lifted him up by the scruff of his neck and lay him to rest on a bed of his own flesh.

"Now I'm going to roast you alive," I said. "I'm going to seal the box and heat it up from beneath. It'll be magic fire, by the way, so it'll burn as long as I need it to. By the time it's over, you'll be blackened and crispy. You'll croak before then, of course, but I don't know how long it'll take. I've never done this before, you see."

"P-please, no! I'll apologize! I'm sorry!"

"How will you go out, I wonder? Will it be from shock from the flames roasting your skin? Will it be from the boiling blood of your severed chunks turning to steam? Maybe you'll run out of air, or maybe the heat will melt your throat first. Oh, I guess you might also die of fear, too. What do you think?"

"No...no, no, no! Nooooooooo!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You've only yourself to blame! You made your bed—now lie in it!!"

I cackled and cackled and cackled.

Again and again and again.

The flame in my heart unleashed a dark cry of joy.

Laughing at the past, the future, and everything in between.

Laughing at the mountain of corpses beneath my feet. Laughing at everything I'd lost.

Laughing at my vengeance. At every unpardonable sin.

Throwing myself on the fire in order to burn everything around me to ash.

That was the way I'd decided to live.

"Don't feel too bad," I said. "Perhaps God will give you a second chance. Then I'll give you an even more excruciating death! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

"Hel—"

I stopped listening. I just laughed and laughed and laughed until the box closed around him like the maw of some ravenous beast, searing Onishi's terrified face into the innermost reaches of my mind.

"Huh," I said at last. "I guess now I'm a murderer in both worlds."

I looked down at the box, Onishi's fearful screams still issuing from within, and channeled mana into the Flaming Sword of Wheels.

"O, faithful servant of the sun. I shall imbue you with fuel everlasting. Bow down to this miraculous and eternal fire. *Ivory Flame of the Sun God.*"

I swung my soul blade gently, and the fiery edge dissolved into white motes of light, like snow. The particles flowed into the hole and lit a shimmering white flame beneath the iron coffin.

"See you. Meet your end in a fiery grave, where no one will ever find you."

Then I covered the hole, the flame, and the metal box with a layer of concrete. To anyone who came here, it would seem as though nothing had happened at all. Nobody would possibly find out that there was a magical fire that required neither oxygen nor fuel, burning just a few feet underground. That dark, bright flame would continue gorging itself on despair, emitting a

cackle dripping with scorn, until the time the screams ended and the soul within that box was transported to hell.

Hmm, the mana density in this world sure is high. So high that it makes it hard to control.

I dispelled both my soul blades and pondered that fact. The world was like a cardboard box, packed tightly with blocks. Even if the blocks could shift a bit, there wasn't a lot of room for them to move. That meant you needed to be pretty skilled to manipulate the mana in this world. No problem for me, of course.

"Anyway, I'd better hurry up and get back to Mai..."

Just then, my phone rang in my pocket.

"A strange number...and the timing is uncanny. Are they watching me?"

After considering whether I should just ignore the call, I decided to answer.

"Is that Mr. Ukei? Oh, thank goodness!"

The person on the other end seemed flustered about something. It wasn't a voice I recognized, and I sensed my earlier paranoia was probably unfounded.

"I'm with the Iizuka police department. Are you sitting down?"

I frowned. It wasn't exactly what you wanted to hear at the start of a phone call.

"There's been a hostage situation at Fujinomiya Institute. It's the Rebirthers—they're demanding to see you, Mr. Ukei."

"...Huh?"

My slight frown deepened into a scowl of concern. What on earth was going on this time?

"We think word of your return must have gotten out somehow. They're threatening to hurt the children if we don't hand you over. Of course, we're working to de-escalate the situation, but we'd like to take you into protective—"
Bip.

I hung up and started hunting for information online, ignoring the ringing as

they tried to call me back. I navigated to a blog collating details about the incident. It was being updated in real time, and it even had links to news articles and video clips that had been posted only a few minutes prior. I clicked on one of them and waited, frustrated by the slow load time.

Eventually, I saw an image of my own school, taken from afar. The shutters, which had been installed in the aftermath of the disappearance, were all down. Judging by the clock visible in the video, it would have been taken during second period.

Right about the time I'd left home and run into Onishi.

"As you can see, the place is still locked down, and it's been about an hour now since the whole thing began. The first reports came in from people living in the neighborhood, along with a video posted online by who appears to be the culprit himself. We're going to run part of the clip now."

Then the report suddenly cut to the video in question. It looked to have been shot inside the school, and it showed a plump, grinning man sitting in a leather armchair.

"How are you, ladies and gentlemen? I am Swordsmaster Alex, a kind and gentle hero who will save the world. Ha-ha-ha!"

He sneered and chortled into the camera.

"N-now, this is not my world. I-I've been chosen by the Holy Sword to cleanse its world of evil. But to go there, I'll need to unseal my power, as well as that of my companions."

Here the camera panned to show the companions in question: a tall, skinny man with long hair, and a large man with glasses, as well as several others.

"I-I'm Rozenhaldt, the Slayer of Mortals."

"I go by Agito Ryuusenji, Massacrer of Multitudes."

"...Schweinsteiger, Ruler of the Everlasting Void."

Their names alone made my head hurt. After an excruciating round of introductions, the camera returned to the first guy.

"We were all born into the wrong world," he said. "We were supposed to be

after all. Both had idiots around every corner.

“We await the good word, honorable citizens!”

With that, the video ended, and the camera switched back to the reporter from earlier. Having learned all I wanted to know, I turned off my phone and considered my next move. First things first, I had to make sure Mai was okay.

“It’s a little far...but with this much mana in the air, I won’t need to consume as much MP.”

I conjured the Squirrel’s Blade of Holding and withdrew from it an MP potion, which I drank. Then I went to hang the blade from my hip, before realizing there was no place for it on my school uniform.

“...Forgot I was wearing this. Guess I’m still in otherworld mode.”

It felt like part of me had been left behind in the other world when I’d come back to Japan. But now the student was gone, and the Revenant was back behind the wheel. Perhaps that was why I now felt a creeping, unpleasant sensation, like something was lurking just out of view.

I summoned the Transcendent Blade of Translocation.

“As drifting cloud, as wand’ring dream, across the reach of space. To distant lands and travelers my flesh and soul displace! Grant me the one my heart desires! *Translocation: Seat of Souls!*”

Using a long chant to save on MP, I pictured Mai in my mind and focused on her. I felt myself crumble away, becoming one with the streams of mana suffusing the world. The thick mana was hard to control at first, but once I got used to it, I could command powers I’d never dreamed of before.

My body disintegrated into tiny particles before being swallowed into the void. For some reason, I felt a deeply unsettling sensation, like a bad premonition of what was about to unfold.

“...Oh, great.”

The teleportation took an instant. It was like coming out of a tunnel. And there I saw...

...a sight deeply familiar to me. Blood, guts, and human gore.

“Why is it always the same? In this world or that...”

“D-dear brother?” “Kaito?”

“Ngrrrrh! Rgh! Brrrrgghh!!”

“...it’s always too late by the time I show up.”

Standing there, splattered from head to toe in blood, swinging their ax and *naginata* down upon the bound and gagged men...

...were my friend and my sibling—Yuuto and Mai.



“Class duty today. Gone to school early. From Bro.”

That letter was the last fragment of normalcy before my life was plunged into utter darkness, the way a circuit breaker snuffs out the light in a room.

“Oh, it’s late. I’d better hurry, or I’ll be late for school. That would be embarrassing, when I always tell him off for it. Or...maybe I should let him get angry at me, and by way of penance...? N-no, no. However tempting it may be, I mustn’t be late on purpose.”

A year and a half ago, early June. Spring had just ended, heralding the arrival of the rainy season. The weather was pleasant, but not completely clear, and a thin layer of gray clouds covered the majority of the sky. The reason I was late sounded like a stereotypical child’s excuse: I had been helping an old lady who had fallen over.

“Phew. I think I’m just barely going to make it— Eek?!”

I was jogging a little, my club *naginata* slung over my shoulder, when it happened. I was just about to reach the bottom of some steps when a blinding white light appeared before my eyes. I still remember the feeling of my foot slipping into empty air.

I tumbled to the bottom of the stairs, and as the world faded to black, I saw a magic circle of light where I had just been standing. The last thing I heard were the voices of concerned onlookers, running to see what had happened.

“...Huh?”

When I next awoke, I found that what little I possessed had been taken from me.

At first, I didn't understand. They told me that Mother and Father had driven off a cliff and disappeared. They told me my dear brother had gone missing, along with hundreds of other people from school. It felt fake, like an image reflected in hundreds of tiny bubbles of soap.

"...It's not true."

I returned to the empty house, but it was no longer my home. I curled up on the rocking chair in my father's study, listening to it squeak. I watered the plants my mother kept and did nothing but stare at them all day. I went into my dear brother's room. I read his comics, wore his clothes, lay in his bed, and wrapped myself in his sheets.

"...It's not true."

I sat in the empty living room and watched the anime we used to watch as children. It depicted the adventures of a troublesome little boy and his upstanding elder sister as they attended school in a fantasy world. It had been very popular when we were young, and when I was too sick to leave the house, Kaito would always play this game with me where we would pretend to be the two main characters. I even started calling him "dear brother," after the girl in the show.

"...It's not true."

He always said we'd play outside together when I got bigger and stronger, just like those two did. I asked him, *"If I become like her, will you want to play with me forever?"* and he said, *"Yeah, we'll be brother and sister, adventuring together."*

I'd wanted to make that a reality, so I picked up *naginata*, the same weapon the girl from that show used. I did everything in my power to become the proud, upstanding young lady she was. Normally, I showered my bungling younger brother with abuse, but at times, I allowed my kind heart to shine through. Whenever a girl began to get close to him, I used fair means and foul to make sure it didn't amount to anything.

"...It's not true."

I wasn't the least bit embarrassed about my obsession. When the girls at school called me names, I said what the girl on TV said: *"A little sister's big brother is the most important thing in the world for her."* It was true. When I said I wanted to go shopping, my brother would come with me. He would buy me presents for my birthday and other special occasions. When he got invited to parties, I would sulk, and that would be enough to make him refuse to go.

Whenever I did anything for him, he would smile and say "Thanks." Then I would reply like the girl on TV did. *"Anything for my useless brother."*

"...It's not true."

Each time I said those words, another bubble burst.

And each time a bubble burst, the gray substance inside them spilled out into my world.

This world of mine was now full of holes, and one wrong step would send me right to the bottom of a deep, dark pit.

The rooms in my house were cold and bleak, devoid of human warmth. Bereft of the people I had cherished. It was like I'd been transported back into the mind of that bedridden little girl, who only had the four walls of her room for company. Trapped inside a dark cistern, struggling for breath.

I was so, so scared.

I remember one time, when I was little, I woke up and realized Kaito was gone. I couldn't bear being alone in the house, so I ran outside and was hit by a car. When I came to, my mother and father and dear brother were all there. At that moment, I didn't care that I'd been hurt. All I cared about was that they were safe.

But this time, there was no way out. I had stood up and taken a step forward, only to fall down a dark pit. One that would break me before I ever reached its end. I stayed motionless, not even crying. Every waking moment I spent watching that old cartoon over and over and over again, until I grew so tired that I passed out. For the first few days, I didn't eat or bathe or get changed. Why would I? There was nobody to do it for. No reason to diet or choose my

food well, no reason to make myself pretty, no reason to wear the mature clothes my brother liked. No reason to try.

All I did was remain transfixed on the TV, occasionally going to the bathroom. I lost track of the days, flickering inconsistently between dreams and my waking nightmare. Soon, even that wall broke down, and I spent my days in a constant slush of shallow sleep and addled consciousness.

“Perhaps next time I wake up, I’ll see my dear brother’s worried face again.”

That was what I was thinking in the few fleeting moments of clarity I was afforded each day.

And each time, I thought...

If not, then I would rather die before I wake, so that I never have to live in a world without him.

Everything up to that point was the first act of my despair. Though all seemed lost, there was still a light in the darkness. I only wished I’d realized it at the time.

“What were you playing at, silly?!”

“We were so worried about you!”

“Ow, ow! It hurts! Stop it, you two!”

I awoke in a hospital bed and sat up to find my friends standing beside me.

Yuuki, whose father was a famous judge, and who hated anything not on the straight and narrow.

And Satomi, the daughter of a rich man, who seemed airheaded at times but could be surprisingly stubborn.

Yuuki slapped me hard across the cheek, while Satomi pinched my upper arm. Tears streamed down their faces as they yelled at me. I didn’t know what I’d done. I just stared at them in confusion. But somehow, their raw emotion sunk into my flesh like knives.

“Hey...stop...what’s...aaah... Waaaah!!”

Like an uncorked bottle, my tears came flooding out. I cried and cried and

cried, releasing all my suppressed emotions, until it felt like my eyes would dry up and my lungs run out of breath.

By the time all three of us passed out on the bed, it was evening. The IV had cleared my mind, and I was able to hear the full story. Apparently, my two friends had grown concerned about my prolonged absence and had come by my house to check on me. When they looked through an open window, they saw me collapsed and emaciated on the floor and immediately called an ambulance. I was rushed to the hospital and treated for malnutrition and severe dehydration.

My two friends had stayed at my bedside the entire time.

"I thought you were the bold one, Mai. I can't believe you would give up so easily! I mean, if your brother is missing, then you have to get off your butt and find him! What happened to the old Mai? Where's that drive you always had when girls came after Kaito and you called them home-wreckers who should drop dead?!"

"That's right, that's right! I can't forget all the times you turned those murderous eyes on us!"

After receiving a lecture from my two best friends, I was discharged from the hospital, and we proceeded to hunt after the missing students...or my brother, to be precise. We solicited information on the internet and badgered the police for updates. We even swapped leads with Yuuto, one of my brother's friends.

It didn't radically alter my life. The world was still full of holes, but with Yuuki and Satomi by my side, I felt I could face it with courage.

And so I had forgotten the lesson that life had seen fit to teach me so harshly.

That there comes a day when all good things must end.

It happened a few months after we'd started investigating. The shocking case had just begun to gain traction in the media after the police file containing the personal information of everyone connected with the case was leaked and the video footage depicting clear evidence of the supernatural was posted online.

At the same time, a troubling conspiracy theory had resulted in a breakdown in public order, culminating in the events of that day.

We had arranged to meet at a nearby shopping mall. I recalled seeing one of those magic circles myself when I'd slipped and fallen. Wondering why it had come after me even though I hadn't been at school, we decided to return to the place it happened to investigate.

It was a little before noon when we heard the screams. Then the first of what would become a series of stabbings transformed that peaceful shopping mall into a maelstrom of chaos.

A man with a knife stabbed a boy from school, then climbed atop him, plunging his blade again and again into his lifeless corpse. The crowd panicked, and I was separated from my friends in the resulting stampede.

That was the very last time I saw Yuuki. I met back up with Satomi afterward, but we couldn't even get Yuuki to answer her phone. She hadn't been home, either, and while we notified the police, they were busy dealing with a spate of stabbings that had suddenly occurred all over the place, so there was little they could do to help.

Satomi and I looked everywhere and turned up nothing.

Six months later, nothing had changed. Then one day, when we were searching for clues like usual, the world decided I hadn't lost enough.

"Satomiii! ...Satomi?"

I was in front of a room we had rented in Satomi's name that we used as our base of operations. Her parents disapproved of her investigating the case, so we worked in secret. It wasn't perfect, but we had little choice, as I wanted to preserve my house exactly as it was. Thus, we pooled our money together to rent something.

"Mmmmm! Mmm, mmm!! Mmm!!"

"Mmmm!! Mmmmm!! Mmmm!!"

I still remember how cold the doorknob felt. Through the paneled wood, I heard the muffled cries of a struggle.

"K-khah...!"

"Hee-hee-hee-hee! Yes...yes, yes, yes!! Now I can finally escape this

godforsaken world!! So long, hairless boss!! So long, condescending workmates!! So long, uppity new hires!! Ah-ha-ha-ha!! I'm going to travel to another world and become the greatest knife master in history!! Ah-ha-ha-ha!!

I burst into the room and came face-to-face with a sight so bizarre, I couldn't believe my eyes. Satomi lay on the floor, and a short, fat man I had never seen before was sitting atop her, plunging something gray and shiny into her stomach.

"Two-hit combo! Three-hit combo! Four-hit combo!"

"Ghh! Guh! ...Agh...!"

The man pulled several more knives from a holster and thrust them into Satomi. As soon as I realized what was happening, I rushed over and pushed him as hard as I could.

"Guh?!"

"Satomi! Satomi!!"

The knives scattered across the floor, but there came no answer to my frenzied cry. The feeble light in Satomi's eyes burned brightly, then winked out in an instant, like a candle extinguished by the wind.

I was thrust into the pits of oblivion, like a torch consigned to the abyss.

"Sato...mi..."

And my hole-riddled world became completely black.

"H-heyyy!! What's the big idea?! Y-you're planning on getting in my way, too? A-ah, I know you! I'll kill both of you and double my score! I'll get cheat powers! Knives akimbo!"

I heard something snap within me.

"...WwroooooaaaaaaAAARGHH?!"

"Huh?"

My mind went blank, my eyes red, and before I knew it, one of the knives was in my hand, cleaving the flesh of the man's neck. By the time I settled down, there were two silent corpses at my feet.

I got scared. I was so terrified, I wanted to scream. I had killed somebody. One of the friends who'd pulled me from the brink was gone. I didn't know what to do.

So I ran. I got away from that place as far as I could. By some miracle, I made it home without anybody spotting me, and after shutting the front door, I slumped to the floor. Only then did I look at my hand, which had frozen like a stone, grasping the blood-covered knife I had used.

"Ah-ha... Ah-ha-ha... I'm sorry, dear brother. Your little sister...has tainted herself."

I wasn't like the girl from that cartoon anymore. After everything I'd done to emulate her, I had failed.

I had been dragged right back down to the depths of a dark ocean. I lacked the willpower to go outside, as well as any friends to help me do it.

By a stroke of luck, no evidence was found at the scene of Satomi's death that connected me to the case, and I was never arrested. But by then, my freedom meant nothing to me anymore. The days went by in a blur. Go to school, go home, eat, sleep, repeat. I didn't want to think. I didn't even know if I considered myself alive. My circuit breaker had tripped, and my world had been plunged into darkness once again.

I didn't care what became of me. However, this time was different. This time, I had someone to blame.

The Rebirthers.

There were more of them. More of the people who'd smashed my patchwork world into bits again.

So I accepted Yuuto's offer. I had blood on my hands already, and there was nobody left I would have liked to hide it from.

Unable to let go, I stood before the dark hole created in my world, waiting for this day to come.

And my dear brother returned to me.

My dear brother came back! My dear brother came back! My dear brother

came back!!

I was so, so, so happy. That was all it took for the light to return to my world. I turned my back on that dark pit, and with my hands clasped behind my back, I tried desperately to make everything the way it was before.

But I couldn't stop things from crumbling by turning a blind eye. My anxiety grew by the day. I kept wondering if today would be the last time I would feel Kaito's warm hand in mine.

To be quite honest, I didn't want my dear brother to regain his memories. But I knew that he would always choose me, no matter what happened. So for him, and for Yuuto, I held back.

I told myself that if I was the same girl as before, it wouldn't have been a problem.

...But then I made another mistake.

The Rebirthers came after my brother, too, attacking him and making it look like a gas explosion.

So I stopped waiting for my dear brother to regain his memory. I thought everything would be fine if he only looked at me and never set foot outside the house again.

What I failed to realize was that he'd already seen me. He knew what I was, that I'd been tainted.

I was ashamed. Deeply, deeply ashamed.

I had to do better. I had to put in the effort.

So that nobody would ever try to take him away from me again.

So that he would never find out about my uncleanness.

I couldn't leave it all to Yuuto. I had to cleanse the taint upon my world myself.

"E-eep! S-stop! I-it hurts! Mommy!!"

"Oh, sorry. I was lost in thought."

I looked down at that taint now, bringing my long reverie to an end.

At my feet was the man who had orchestrated this attack on our school, recruiting Rebirthers from across the internet.

The men who kidnapped Yuuki and did awful things to her.

The men who treated Kaori like their plaything.

I had been tipped off about what was going to happen, so it wasn't difficult to get the drop on them.

Now I looked down at the man bleeding like a stuck pig at my feet as though he were a reflection of that day. I had broken his arms and legs with the back of the blade of my *naginata*. It was no mere practice weapon, and I had sliced off his nose and the gut that made him look so unsightly.

"After what you did to Yuuki, it would be a shame to let you die so easily. And didn't you come after my dear brother as well? Well? I'm listening."

"I—I—I don't know anything about that! I—I just wanted to become a hero...!!"

"Silence. Anyone who threatens my peaceful life must be wiped off the face of the earth."

"Gah...ghh..."

I brought my blade down hard, cracking the disgusting man's skull open.

...Aah. I got my hands dirty again...

Blood, shards of bone, lumps of flesh, and brain matter went flying.

I needed everyone who had dirtied me to disappear before I could return to my dear brother.

"But...just one more. Only one more left."

I turned to Yuuto. He'd embedded his ax in the arm of another man, who now resembled the crooked remains of a dead tree. All that was left was the filthiest, ugliest man of them all—the one behind everything.

I hoped this would ease Yuuki's soul a little. I'd killed the scumbag who stabbed Satomi, and now I'd slain the one who laid his hands on Yuuki, too. Once all of them were gone, I could return to my old self again.

It would be okay.

Once there was no longer any trace on Earth of these Rebirthers...

Once everything went back to the way it was, and there was nobody to distract my dear brother from me...

...then what would be stopping him from spending the rest of his life by my side?

He would be mine, and mine alone, wouldn't he...?

"Oh, great... Why is it always the same? In this world or that one, it's always too late by the time I show up."



So I couldn't afford to have him come here. Not now.

"D-dear brother...?"

He couldn't. He couldn't. He couldn't.

"No! No, no, no! No! No! No!! Noooooooooooooooo!!"

Oh, dear brother.

This won't stop me from being your cute little Mai, will it?



"Wh-what's happening? Help me, Yuuto!"

Ah. This dream.

The sight of Shiori disappearing into light before my eyes.

"It hurts! I can't breathe!"

A dream that had haunted me ceaselessly since that day.

And a dream that had changed ever so slightly in recent nights.

Before a single word escaped my lips, Shiori turned to motes of light and vanished.

And then her kid sister Kaori appeared, her eyes vacant.

"Yuuto... It hurts..."

In the darkness of the void, I heard her voice.

One by one, her arms and legs rotted off.

"Help me... Help me... Help me..."

I couldn't save her. I couldn't run away. I couldn't even speak.

And then I woke up, drenched in despair.

"Hah! Haah...haah...haah...ngh."

My sweat-soaked clothes clung to my skin. I'd started keeping a change of pajamas and a pitcher of water next to my bed. I downed a lukewarm glass and went to take a hot shower.

I couldn't afford to mess up. Not today.

Ever since that person told me what had become of Kaori, I'd been preparing for this day. The moment I could finally put the Rebirthers in their place.

"...For Kaito, and for Mai, too. I'll kill them all."

They were the only ones left I could help. And yet the Rebirthers had come after them as well. When I'd heard about the bombing, I could almost hear the blood drain from my face.

I didn't want to burden Kaito, who'd come back covered in cuts, or Mai, who'd finally gotten to see her big brother again. So I left them out of the plan and asked her to make sure she and Kaito would be absent from school on the day in question.

Mai seemed unhappy, but she had managed to get her special person back, and I didn't want to mess that up. I had her deal with Kaito in a way that would keep him from realizing what was going on.

Nobody needed to dirty their hands but me. At least, that was what I thought.

Once I learned the two of them were safe, I was overcome with relief, and I waited patiently for the day my enemy would act.

But last night, Mai had called me to let me know she would be joining me after all. I was hesitant to agree—what if Mai got hurt, just after getting Kaito back? But she was insistent, so I ultimately relented.

"We're going to make them suffer and die in despair."

What they had done to Kaori was unforgivable. They'd lied to her and told her they were doing everything for her sister.

And they'd tried to stop Kaito from regaining his memories. There was always a chance, however minuscule, that a clue to tracking down Shiori lay within his mind.

So today, I was no longer a human.

Today, I would torture my fellow man to the limits of depravity.

They would suffer beyond anything thought humanly possible. That way, I

would show this country the fate that awaited the other Rebirthers hiding in the shadows: a punishment far exceeding the crime, which would send a warning to all who would follow in their footsteps.

But more than anything else, I would do this to satisfy my own rage.

No human would ever do such a thing. Yet for me, it came easy.

“I’m off, Shiori and Kaori. Time to take revenge for everything they did to you.”

I donned my school uniform and began my daily commute. I arrived at school a little before the starting bell and retrieved the things I had stashed away. Some homemade flash grenades, several pairs of handcuffs, and an ax wrapped in white cloth I’d hidden on the school premises. With these in hand, I went to our meeting place, an unused classroom, to wait for Mai.

She arrived a short while later, her *naginata* in tow. Beneath the cloth was no wooden training weapon, but the genuine article, complete with a sharpened blade.

“Good morning, Yuuto.”

“Mai. Good morning... I’ll ask you again. Are you sure you want to do this? It’s not too late to turn back.”

“You don’t have to worry about me, Yuuto. I’ve decided I can’t just keep leaving it to others. If I want to regain my peaceful days with my dear brother, then I shall have to take them back myself. That is why I am here.”

“...Fair enough. Then let’s make sure everything goes perfectly. I can’t wait to get my hands on those assholes. Besides, if we fail, then other people are also going to get hurt.”

We were doing this for ourselves. We knew what was coming, but we hadn’t warned the innocent students or staff about it. We couldn’t risk anything that would interfere with our plans.

“Also, I heard from our mutual acquaintance. Those insects tried to kill my dear brother, didn’t they?”

“...”

The previous day, we'd had the truth explained to us. I didn't know how, but the Rebirthers had figured out Kaito was back. And in their stupid point-rating system, he was the top target.

There was no way they would ignore him.

Mai had said she would make him stay at home, even if she had to tie him to the bed. But even without Kaito to look out for, the situation was perilous.

"I'll punish anyone who tries to harm Kaito with my own two hands. I cannot just sit idly by."

"...Yes, I suppose that's right."

A little while later, a piercing alarm rang out, and the metal shutters came down over the doors and windows. They had been installed to keep intruders out, but now they were a cage that prevented anyone from escaping the horrors within.

"It's started," I said.

"Yes, it has. And once this is over, my useless brother will be all mine... Hee-hee-hee...hee-hee-hee-hee. ♪"

"...Mai?"

I wasn't sure what Mai was imagining as a blithe smile wormed its way across her face, but I wasn't sure I wanted to know. Still, I couldn't help pulling a confused look.

"What is it, Yuuto?"

"...No, it's nothing."

"I see. Well, when this is all over, you must come visit us. I shall grant a special exception and allow you to see Kaito, as you are his best friend."

For a moment, I wondered if I really should have let Mai join in after all. But we were past the point of no return now.

"Besides, you're not the only one who's broken."

Though I still had my fears, I could tell I was on the verge of collapse. After I had been told of what had become of Kaori, my rational mind had kept

screaming in my ears, day after day. I was drowning in a sea of hate that threatened to sweep away the last of my sanity.

I didn't even know what a normal person was anymore.

Besides, the only person who could save Mai now was Kaito.

"Assuming they know what they're doing, then their first step after locking down the building will be to wave their guns around and lock the staff in the classrooms. Then they'll realize that Kaito isn't here."

"Once that happens, they'll foolishly put out a call for him to be brought here."

"...Most likely, yes. They'll gather in the principal's office and upload a video asking for Kaito and a bunch of guns. They're delusional. They just think the world will bend to suit their whims."

Their online echo chambers had conditioned the Rebirthers to think that way. It was impressive, if nothing else, their ability to concoct whatever fantasy they required in the moment to justify their wild aims. That, and the sheer willpower required to infiltrate the police for months, gradually replacing the security teams with members of their own cult, all just to pull off this mind-numbingly stupid operation.

"We'll wait an hour. We need them to send out that video. If the police raid the place, everything will be for nothing."

"Quite right. And if we wait any longer, the targets may split up."

Mai and I said nothing more. We sat in silence, waiting for the hour to pass.

"...It's time. Let's go," I said.

"Yes. It's time to clean up."

From what I could tell, the video was out in the wild now. I switched off my phone.

I clutched the ax I'd brought in one hand and the flash grenade made from an empty soda can in the other.

Mai had her *naginata* with its sharpened steel blade.

And between us, a dozen pairs of handcuffs for torturing them.

After we reached the door to the principal's office, I opened it a crack and tossed in the improvised flash-bang.

"Huh? What's that, a can of—?"

I heard the people within turn to look at the explosive in confusion. A second later, there was a flash of light and a burst of sound, no less powerful than when I'd tried it in testing.

""Gaaaaaaaagh?!""

We burst into the room amid the screams and clasped the handcuffs around each of the Rebirthers before they could regain their sight and hearing. It took even less time than I'd expected. We snatched their recording equipment and set it up to shoot a little video of our own.

When the blindness wore off at last, one of the men looked at us and yelled.

"Wh-who are you two? Minions of the demon lord?!"

"Perhaps," I replied. "We've come to renounce our humanity. To become demons and drag you all down to hell with us."

"Eep?!"

I slowly unraveled the cloth around my ax, revealing it to the terrified men.

"N-no...stop...! Don't kill me!"

The moment one started begging for his life, I heard the last of my sanity fall away.

"Fuck you! You expect me to live after you killed a little girl, cut her arms and legs off one by one?! Who the fuck do you think you are?!"

"Gaaaaaaaagh?! M-my fingeeeeer?!"

I felt blood splatter across my cheek. I'd been worried I wouldn't be able to do it, that I'd chicken out at the last moment. But when it came time to swing my ax, I barely had to think about it. In fact, the anger propelled my blade, which swung like a car whose brakes had given out.

"Agh! Aaaagh! I'm bleeding! I'm bleeding!!"

“Oh, shut up. You lived so much longer than her, so your deaths should be that much more painful! That’s only fair, right?!”

“Ghiiiiieeee! Aghh! Aghh! Aghh!!”

“Eeeek!”

“S-stop! I-I’m going back home!”

“H-help! Let me go!!”

A surprising amount of blood stained the floor, and the men we’d tied up started to scream.

“Don’t worry. You’ve still got time. We’ll be a little while torturing this guy. He’ll pay for what he’s done...just like you will.”

“””” ...””””

They were shocked into silent terror, as though they’d forgotten to breathe.

Every one of them repulsed me. They’d done horrible things to Kaori, and to Mai’s friend Yuuki, but once the shoe was on the other foot, they curled up in terror like dogs.

Still, I knew. Had they reacted any other way, I wouldn’t have been able to hold back my anger at all.

“You’re going to wish you’d never been born,” I said, revealing the wicked smile I’d kept hidden up until that point. “And after what we do to you, even reincarnating into a fantasy world won’t be enough of an escape to heal our trauma.”



Red. Red. Red.

Blood, chopped flesh, and hatred.

Now that my memories had returned, it was a sight I was extraordinarily familiar with. How unfortunate, then, that the orchestrator of this carnage was someone else. Since they’d come this far, I knew there was no turning back for either of them. Mai was on the verge of a breakdown already.

“No! No, no, no, no!! Noooooooooo!!”

“Mai...”

“D-don’t look, dear brother! Y-you have it all wrong! I was just...trying...to cleanse my...huh? Huh? No, no, no, no!!!”

Mai clapped her hands over her ears like a child and began shaking her head left and right.

“M-Mai?”

Even Yuuto could see something was wrong with her. He stared at her in befuddlement.

“Yuuto,” I said. “I know you did nothing wrong, and you had no other choice, but just to let you know, I’m going to hit you later. Then you can hit me back ten times.”

“Kaito...?”

I had made so many mistakes. I didn’t know if this would make up for them, but I couldn’t allow Mai to become even more broken than she already was.

Guess even getting my memories back didn’t change what I have to do.

It was dizzying, but I was getting accustomed to just how powerless I really was once again. The only thing I could do for Mai was to offer her the lesser of two evils—to grant her my wretched fate in order to protect her from an even worse one.

Leone had once called this power of mine “brainwashing.” At the time, I’d found that to be a blatant act of disrespect for the solemn oath I’d sworn with Minnalis and Shuria. Yet I could not deny that there was no other word for what I was about to do next. With my little sister *non compos mentis*, I had little recourse.

“O-of course! Dear brother can’t really be here! That means this is all fake!”

There wasn’t much time. I could see the light rapidly fading from Mai’s eyes as her words became more and more muddled.

“...I have to make it go away. I have to make it go away. I have to make it go away.”

Mai trained her eyes and the point of her sharpened *naginata* on me. A tiny drop of blood fell from the crimson-soaked blade and landed on the floor.

I felt her intentions as keenly as a wire brush to my skin. This time, it was Yuuto who cried out in surprise.

“M-Mai?!”

It seemed that Yuuto hadn’t realized just how close Mai was to the edge. Then again, I couldn’t blame him. It was only because I’d seen so many broken souls on the battlefield that I knew what a person on the brink looked like.

I downed an MP potion to restore the mana consumed in my teleportation, then conjured the Holy Sword of Retribution.

I pointed the tip at my sister.

“I’m about to rewrite your soul, Mai. I don’t care if that counts as brainwashing; it’s a far better fate than what awaits you otherwise.”

“Y-you too, Kaito?!”

Yuuto couldn’t believe the sight of his two remaining friends aiming their weapons at each other’s hearts.

“It’s okay,” said Mai. “Everything’s okay. This brother is just a fake. Once he’s gone, everything will go back to how it was before.”

“‘Fake’ is a bit harsh,” I said. “Besides, you can never make everything ‘go back to how it was before.’ Even if you rewind time itself or erase people’s memories. No matter how you try to cover it up, nobody can take back what’s been done, not even a god.”

“Sh-shut up! Shut up! Shut up! My brother would never say such horrible things! He loves me! He wouldn’t point his sword at me, not ever! He’s my... he’s my useless big brother!!”

“...There you go again. Stop calling me *useless*, you moronic little sister.”

“See?! Kaito would never call me that!!”

“We’re going round in circles. It’s time to show me what you’re made of, sister. We’ve never had a fight like this before. Pay attention, and you might

just learn something.”

I adopted a fencing stance, turning my body sideways and wiggling the tip of my sword to provoke an opportunity.

“Y-you impostor... Stop pretending to be my brother!!”

Mai lunged forward, sweeping her *naginata* at my shins. I knocked the point aside with the edge of my soul blade, but Mai swiveled her polearm around, capitalizing on the momentum I’d imparted to deliver a blow with the blunt end.

Her moves were perfect, practiced. Which made it all the easier to see what was coming.

“Wh-what?!”

I didn’t duck or dodge to the side to avoid Mai’s blow. In advance of its arrival, I took a deep lunge inward, sliding my blade up the handle of the *naginata*.

“Sorry about this,” I said. “I won’t ask you to forgive me.”

I transformed the Holy Sword of Retribution into its compact, daggerlike form for making contracts. Then I plunged it into Mai’s heart.

“Kaito?!”

“Aaaagh... Aaaagh... Aaaaaaaaaagh!!”

Accompanied by Yuuto’s screams, dark flames burst out of me and Mai and poured into each other.

“Aah... Aargh... H-huh? D-dear brother?”

My burning memories and thick, syrupy emotions filled the fractures in Mai’s glass heart like glue. Though water would simply seep through the cracks, this viscous hate congealed within her, turning the whole thing into a single, revenge-focused mass.

And at the same time, I learned of Mai’s vengeance, as well as her desires.

I learned of the inhuman acts Yuuki and Satomi had endured before their deaths. I felt her rage at the Rebirthers, who’d perpetrated those acts. I watched as Satomi was murdered by a man I’d never seen.

I saw Kawakami, the woman who'd orchestrated everything, showing me an image of Yuuki with her arms and legs severed, and her skin coated in unnatural blotches. Then I saw the explosion at the police station, as she explained to me that this was no accident but an attack on her brother's life by the Rebirthers, and that they were still after him.

All these visions were accompanied by a deep, murderous loathing, directed at everyone who meant to take away what I held dear. The only thing tainting that pure vengeance was a fear I had instigated by coming back to life: Mai's fear of losing me again. It tugged on her puppet strings, the same fear I'd harbored during the time I lost my memories.

"...Ah, I see now. I don't quite understand it all, but I'm gathering you were scared of what I would think if I found out you'd killed someone. Well, that was silly. How could I hate someone who's the same as me?"

We had both been trying so hard to hide our bloodstained hands from each other.

"Well, now you know. Besides, you've only murdered a handful of people... Then again, even if you turned into some sort of lust-driven serial killer, I'd still love you. My sister obsession is just that bad."

I cracked a wry smile and patted Mai on the head like I always did.

"Huh...? Ah...huh?"

Unlike what had happened with Minnalis and Shuria, when I clearly explained the abilities of the sword in advance, Mai seemed to be having trouble adjusting to what had just happened. She seemed to be sane again, at least, and that was the most important thing.

"So, Mai? Are you awake now?"

"Wh-what is this, some sort of dream?"

As always, the Holy Sword that lay embedded in Mai's heart dissolved into the air and disappeared.

"That answer doesn't exactly inspire confidence," I said. "So tell me how you feel."

“I want to kill her. Princess Alicia, and everyone else who hurt you and destroyed my world. I feel like I’ll lose my mind if I don’t... Why...why did they do that to you? Why did they make a fool of you? Only I’m allowed to do that. Everyone else can drop dead.”

In those words, I felt the black heat of Mai’s vengeance, ignited by my memories. I knew I had just let my sister take her first step down the path of darkness. I didn’t regret what I’d done, but I was despondent nonetheless.

“And...and I wish I could forget everything I did while I took leave of my senses. Oh god, no, it’s so embarrassing. Dear brother, please, pretend none of that happened!”

“Cool, looks like you’re thinking straight, at least.”

Mai turned bright red and hung her head in shame. It made my anger burn all the brighter at the *mastermind who’d stoked Mai’s fears*.

“Now, there’s more I’d like to talk about,” I said, “but first...Yuuto. Let me ask you a question. These guys planned to kill the students and staff, right? With poison, going by what they said in the video. What’s the situation with that?”

“...We’re safe. They pretended to be maintenance men and sabotaged the air conditioning to flood certain rooms with cyanide gas. We found the trap and switched out one of the chemicals for plain old water, so even if it goes off, there won’t be any danger.”

Well, that was a relief.

“I see, so that’s why I can sense people huddled up in different rooms. They herded the hostages into the classrooms that would fill with gas. And the number of hostages is an exact multiple of the number of guys in this room. I guess that has something to do with their points system.”

Still, cross-referencing the information from Onishi with that found in Mai’s memories led me to only one conclusion: Kawakami had intentionally provoked Mai and Yuuto because she knew they would take out the Rebirthers. But why would she do something like that, and what were her plans now?

Onishi said that Kawakami wanted to use me to bring magic to this world, so... Aah, whatever. I don’t have a clue.

“At times like these, there’s only one thing to do.”

Coming up with counterstrategies just wasn’t my style. It would be far easier to beat the truth out of Kawakami.

“Kaito...have your memories returned?”

“Yeah, they have. I remembered everything I should never have forgotten... Migrating wagon, fates unite. To distant lands these souls invite. *Translocation: Caravan’s Journey*.”

I conjured up the Transcendent Blade of Translocation and cast a spell over all the hostages in the school. It was a lot of people, but they were bunched into a few groups, and I was getting used to manipulating the rich mana of this world. Recovery speeds and consumption rates were far better here, so long as you could get past the increased casting difficulty.

Just then, I heard busy cries from outside, as every person in the school, save us three, was teleported into the yard. Now I would only need to look after these two if something happened.

“Now then, Yuuto. Before we go any further, there’s something I need to talk to you about, and as you can probably tell, there isn’t any good news. So if you don’t want to know, say the word. Mai and I’ll go—”

“Please, Kaito. I need to know.”

Before I even finished, Yuuto bowed his head.

“...Fine. I’ll start at the end, then. Yuuto, if Shiori really disappeared into that magic circle, as you say, then I’m afraid she’s no longer with us.”

“B-but that can’t be right! I mean, you—”

“I was summoned to another world, yes. Alone. The others were offered to turn me into a hero. The people in that video weren’t teleported...they were sacrificed.”

“...Grr. No...”

Yuuto looked racked with despair. On some level, though, he seemed to have been expecting it.

“Then, that means I...”

“That’s not the end. Like I said, Yuuto. I was summoned. Do you realize what that means? Someone is responsible for making me who I am now.”

“...Ghh.”

Deep within the windows of Yuuto’s eyes, I saw the faintest spark flicker to life.

“And there’s more. Somebody is responsible for this whole mess as well. You can’t run out of steam before we’re even out of the opening act. Not after you came this far willing to do whatever it takes!”

“Is that whole thing...really true?”

“C’mon, man. Would I lie to you?”

“Didn’t you just lie to me a second ago?”

“Huh?”

“You said there wasn’t any good news. You started with the bad news, sure, but what about the other two things you said?”

I watched as the flicker in Yuuto’s gaze became a cold, black flame.

“I never knew who to blame. I kept on clinging to hope, but even that was fading, and I thought perhaps I would die without ever finding out who to curse. But now I have someone to turn this anger upon, don’t I? Plus, if I never found out who was controlling these guys, that would just give me more reasons to die. So don’t do this.”

“...I see. So I take it you’re coming with me, too? Back to the other world.”

“I guess that means you have somewhere in mind, right?”

The smiles on our faces at that moment were not smiles of happiness. They were the sneers of avengers, looking down on the world with scorn.

“You could say that.”

“D-dear brother? Does that mean...I can come, too?”

“Of course. I can hardly leave you here on your own, now can I?”

I patted her head again, and Mai's worries seemed to melt away. Then I conjured up the Holy Sword of Retribution once more.

"This is one of the abilities I gained in the other world," I explained. "Use it to make a contract with me. Then our hatred, our fury, our vengeance, will be shared. Your feelings will never fade as long as your revenge is incomplete, and you'll feel the same anger you feel now up until the day you die. Oh, and please try not to do that, because our lives will be tied to each other's."

"We'll share...our vengeance? Hmm, I'm not sure about that. I like you as a friend, Kaito, but it feels wrong doing that sort of thing with another man."

"Hey, I don't like it, either, but we don't have a choice if you want to come with me. This contract binds our souls together, which you'll need if you don't want to instantly explode when we hit the other side. Besides, no one's allowed in on my vengeance without accepting this, Yuuto, not even you."

"Huh. Fine, I guess. Hand me the sword."

Yuuto took the Holy Sword and, without hesitation, plunged it deeply into his own heart. The moment he did, I felt his emotions flow into mine, steeped in the purest of hate.

"...*Rgh*, two in a row's a real doozy."

"Grh... Argh... Damn, man, that was hard to watch. Way worse than mine. I see why you can't trust me without the contract now."

Soon, the soul blade dissolved into black light, the same way as before.

"But perhaps it was worth seeing. Now I know the face of my enemy. Princess Alicia...you're the one who took Shiori away from me and created the Rebirthers. And Kawakami was pulling strings, too... Ha-ha-ha, guess I was just dancing in the palm of her hand this entire time."

He hung his head in shame, but I could still see the smirk plastered across his lips.

"Hey, Yuuto. We don't have a lot of time. If you're going to kill these guys, then make it quick."

"Gyaaaaaagh?!"

I thrust my Soul Blade of Beginnings into the floor, stabbing the ringleader in the hand as he attempted to crawl out of the room in the chaos of my sudden appearance.

“Or I can do it, if you prefer. I could do with a little warm-up.”

I glanced down at the man writhing on the floor.

“No,” said Yuuto. “I’ll do it. We know he’s not the mastermind now, but still, this is the plan I started. I’ll be the one to finish it.”

“I would also like to take revenge for Yuuki and Satomi myself,” Mai said.

From the looks in their eyes, they didn’t seem willing to budge. I could tell right away they were going to be good partners in crime, just like Minnalis and Shuria were.

“In that case, I’ll leave him in your capable hands.”

With that, I took up the Aegis Blade of Shielding.

“These bounds define, these walls confine. No trespasser may undermine. *Severance.*”

As I spoke the words, a barrier of orange light engulfed the room.

“Now nobody should be able to enter for five hours,” I explained. “I trust that gives you enough time? I’ve got a thief to catch, so I’ll see you two later.”

I dispelled the Aegis Blade of Shielding and summoned the Transcendent Blade of Translocation in its place.

“...Man, Kaito. You can do anything, can’t you?”

“We shall see you later, dear brother. Don’t be too long, will you?”

“AIIIIIEEEE!! IT HUUURTS!! STOPPPPP!!”

Mai plunged her blade into the pig’s left leg, while Yuuto pressed his heel into the leg wound I’d inflicted earlier. They reminded me a little of Minnalis and Shuria.

“...I think you both are going to make great partners in crime,” I said. Then I activated my teleportation spell, leading me to the location of the Clothes of Dark Spirits.

“Geez, it’s not easy teleporting to a place I’ve never been before, even with the trail of my own mana to guide me.”

I appeared inside a deserted section of a building. I could sense people nearby and the Clothes of Dark Spirits somewhere far below.

“Still, it was closer than I thought. I’ve got a lot of MP left over.”

Judging by the cost of the teleportation, I hadn’t traveled far from school, and I had arrived in what I presumed was the laboratory Onishi had mentioned.

I was in a white-walled chamber, filled with machines of dubious purpose. In the center of the room were five pods, three of which contained my leather armor, my regular clothes, and several of my knives. Lucky start. Unlike the Clothes of Dark Spirits, these items didn’t radiate enough mana to trace. I was worried I would have needed to grope around in the dark to find them, but now that they were in my hands, I could make a beeline for where the smell of mana was strongest.

“Wh-who’s there?! Where did you come from?”

While I pondered my next move, one of the white-robed researchers, all of whom had been stunned into silence by my sudden appearance, decided to speak.

“Guess I’d better get down to the lower levels,” I said. “Here we go...”

“Hey, are you listening to—?”

Craaash!!

I put my fist through one of the pods, converting it to scrap metal faster than a hydraulic press. I didn’t really need to use that much force; I was just a little angry. Okay, I was a lot angry.

I can’t bear to see these clothes treated like this after Minnalis and Shuria lovingly took care of them. Look at this, they’ve frayed the edges, those bastards.

“Anyway, let’s stash that away.”

“H-how on earth?! That casing was made with reinforced acrylic fiber!”

I ignored the researchers and picked up my equipment, moving on to the other two pods.

“Aaargh?! How could you?! Do you have any idea how much those cost?!”

“No. How much?”

I stowed the rest of my reclaimed equipment in the Squirrel’s Blade. Having vented my fury, I decided to listen to what the researchers had to say.

“Those analysis devices cost fifty billion yen each!”

“...Huh.”

Whoops. I wish I hadn’t asked, I thought, as I let out the ping of magical sonar, granting me a far more detailed plan of the building layout than my rough senses could achieve.

Now that I think about it, I was going to reduce this whole place to rubble as payback for blowing up the police station anyway, so I guess it doesn’t matter that much.

Rather than spending time tracking down criminals, I would have preferred to get back to the other world as soon as possible. I’d spent too long dilly-dallying already, so I didn’t have time to bother with the small fry.

“...Yeah, what am I letting myself get distracted for? What an idiot.”

I destroyed the last two pods.

“””””Gaaaaaaagh?!”””””

Then I set about trashing the place as efficiently as possible. Each of these machines was worth more than I’d ever see in a lifetime. Perhaps their analysis had turned up something, but I didn’t care about that. Presumably, the person in charge of this place would have investors to answer to if all this expensive equipment got destroyed, and that was good enough for me. I didn’t need to bloody my hands, and some of these researchers were probably just doing their jobs anyway.

So I was pleased to see how the lab intended to deal with me.

When I stepped out into the long hallway, a bunch of short, cylindrical robots

wielding deadly machine gun turrets appeared.

“Ah, to think Japanese engineering has come so far. It’s like something out of an anime,” I remarked.

The robots made some sort of garbled bleeping sound, either to me or to each other.

“Perfect timing,” I said. “I’ve been meaning to get some practice in this whole time. Need something to shake the dust off with.”

Just then, there was a burst of static, and a voice spewed from a speaker at the back of the hallway.

“Testing, testing. Attention, intruder. This is the chief scientist speaking. Cease your rampage and surrender at once. The data you have stolen is government property. It is too much for one man to possess. I don’t know why you’ve come here, Mr. Ukei, but you need to understand just how important this data is for the country and—”

Crash!

I kicked one of the robots, sending it flying into the wall with the speaker and security camera, where it exploded.

“...I take it back. I am going to kill somebody after all. You.”

Whoever the guy on the speaker was, he knew my name. That meant he almost certainly was aware he was stealing from me, too. I couldn’t just let that slide.

“Haaaargh!!”

I suddenly sprinted down the hallway. At the same time, the robots fired their machine guns at me, about twenty in all.

“Outta my way, scrap metal!”

Conjuring a soul blade in each arm, I sliced the stream of bullets out of the air before cutting the robots to ribbons.

Cut! Slice! Rend! Kill!

The robots, the motion-sensing turrets on the walls, the shutters dropping

down to bar access.

I sliced them all apart and continued.

“Out of my waaaay!!”

Amid a hail of bullets, I leaped. Off the walls, the ceiling, and then my “Air Step” platforms.

Dancing on the border of death, adrenaline flowing.

I could feel my focus growing deeper and deeper, until I almost sank into the thick air around me.

“Raaaaaaargh!!”

Slicing the bullets? Too inefficient. Deflect them. Turn them into an attack. Don't waste mana on Air Step when there are perfectly good bullets around. Use Air Step to repel them back at the enemy as you leap across the platforms.

With each instant stretched out to seconds, I danced through the rain of attacks. Every kill was more efficient than the last.

After a few short minutes that felt like an eternity, the robots all lay destroyed, and I arrived before the room where my prey was hiding. It was on the other side of a chamber three stories high that was the size of a large playing field. Beyond the glass window, I could sense the Clothes of Dark Spirits, as well as the unfortunate soul who'd just so happened to fall into my lap.

“Testing, testing. I'm surprised you've made it this far. I don't need machines to tell me you've surpassed what normal humans are capable of. I suppose I should have listened to what Dr. Maeno told me.”

“...”

Beyond the glass, a fussy-looking older man with impressive white hair was staring down at me. Beside him stood that snake, Dr. Maeno.

His presence came as no surprise, since I'd detected him earlier with the magical sonar, but still. That guy had some horrible luck.

“So sorry about this, Mr. Ukei.” Maeno's voice came over the speaker. *“You see, I could tell your recovery speed was nothing short of extraordinary, but our*

tests showed you to be a completely normal human being. I needed to know more, but this research lab was the only place I had access to. It's not made to study living things, so I came to ask a favor of the director here, but I never expected you to show up."

I had noticed the leering way he'd looked at me, of course, but I was willing to forgive and forget, as he hadn't actually done anything to me. So to meet him here, right at the end like this? What else could I say but *You have some bad luck, man.*

"..."

"You probably didn't notice, but we've been leading you into this room. I'm not sure how you—"

"Oh, come on. Just send in your Test-o-matic 3000 or whatever you have planned. I came here for a reason, you know."

I had no patience for monologues, so I quickly cut off the director before he had the chance to speak.

I could have taken the direct route here, but it looked like they were trying to guide me in a specific direction by lowering shutters and manipulating the guard robots' numbers. I was in no mood to stand around and listen, after I'd taken the scenic route.

"Send out your mecha-robo boss and give me a good fight scene. My prey, the prey I was going to let go, just hopped into my mouth. Do you know how hard it is to avoid biting down? Forget the starters and give me the main dish already!"

"...You seem to misunderstand your position here. Yes, you may have beaten many of our patrol robots—outdated models, I may add—but don't think for one second the next will be as easy. I urge you to surrender; it'll be far easier to get information out of you if you're alive."

Then the speaker cut out, and the door I'd just entered through came down behind me. The doors at either side of the room began to slide open, and then...

"Now, witness why we led you here. You may have held your own against the few robots we could send into those tight halls, but I think you'll find an open-

plan battle to be quite different.”

...a bunch of similar robots flooded the room, about twice the amount I had defeated so far today. They looked almost identical to the earlier ones, except they were colored black instead of silver, like someone had decided to swap out the paint job and call it a day.

“...Wh...wh...wh...?”

“Speechless? I knew you would be. These latest models are upgrades over their forebears in every respect. Stopping power, firing speed, none of it compares to—”

“What the hell are these mooks?! Give me my big fuck-off robot, you assholes!”

For one brief moment, I truly thought I’d get to test my skills against a top-of-the-line foe. I took out my Flaming Sword of Wheels, whose blade was formed of fire, and the Weasel’s Blade of Wind, a green-and-red *katana*. Then I crossed the swords and slashed left and right.

“Chain Blast: Smelter! Wind Slice: Spirit Blade!”

The next moment, the sound of explosions and shredding metal shook the room as hundreds of blades of wind and explosive blasts tore everything apart around me.

A few seconds later, all that remained of the robots was a smoldering pile of wreckage.

“Wh-what?! What was that? What did you do?! Those robots were made of a special alloy that’s nigh indestructible! Impervious to explosions! Far stronger than the steel armor of the previous models!”

“What a drag. If I knew this was going to happen, I wouldn’t have bothered taking the long way—”

“Send in the prototype!”

“B-but sir, it hasn’t been fully tested! What if it goes berserk?!”

“Now!!”

“Oh...?”

The director, apparently so flustered he'd forgotten to turn off the microphone, barked orders to a subordinate. Maeno, by the way, was panicking nearby.

A warning siren began to sound.

“Yeah, this is what I'm talking about. I doubt it'll pose much of a challenge, but I want to see something badass.”

This time, the right-hand side of the far wall rose up, revealing a humanoid robot about ten meters tall.

“You gotta have your bipedal weapons platforms,” I said, licking my lips. “Man, I hope it transforms.”

I darted aside, dodging the robot's arm as it swung down on me with surprising velocity. From out of its chest and face parts came a barrage of gunfire that tore through the clouds of smoke. I evaded by jumping back and forth from Air Step platforms before I sliced the robot's head clean off. Then I stuck the Flaming Sword of Wheels into the “wound,” heating up the machine's internals to thousands of degrees. The mech slumped disappointingly to its knees and collapsed to the floor.

“I-impossible! He finished it off in the blink of an eye!”

“Now, time to end this and go home.”

I thrust the Flaming Sword of Wheels through the quintuple-layered glass barrier. Then I sliced open an entrance with the Weasel's Blade of Wind before stepping into the room.

“Y-you insolent child!”

“Eep?!”

“Heh. Nice theme park you got here,” I chuckled. “As thanks, I'll make this quick.”

The two scientists fell to the floor, their knees turned to jelly. I raised both soul blades above my head.

“S-stop!! You don’t understand how much this country needs my intellect!”

“I-I’m sorry! Please, forgive me! I’m begging you!”

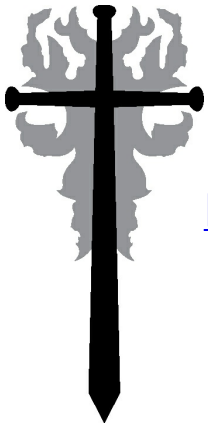
“Farewell.”

Swish! Swish!

I sliced downward in a V-shaped motion, decapitating the two of them. Leaving their still corpses behind, I walked over to the display case where my Clothes of Dark Spirits were being kept.

“Well, that was a little more work than I expected. The only thing left to do is unmask that woman, and then I can head back to the other world.”

I sliced the display case open, put on the Clothes of Dark Spirits, and teleported out of there.



FINAL CHAPTER

Abandoning Home

Dear Witch. Thank you for all the advice you have given me in the past. However, I cannot abide by the instructions of someone who attempted to obscure the existence of the returnee, Kaito Ukei. It was a good thing that I asked Riegal the Swift to keep an eye on you, else I might never have uncovered this deception. Fortunately, the time will be right to act tomorrow. Until we meet again, on the imaginary plane where the time lines intersect!"

"Those fools! Why are they only this smart when it suits them?"

I never expected them to find out about him so soon.

The Rebirthers were idiots, but they were useful idiots. They'd made a fine front for my secret research when I riled them up, and they'd handled the jobs I couldn't leave to Onishi.

I knew their imaginations often got the better of them; that was exactly what made them so easy to manipulate. But never in my wildest dreams would I expect them to have possessed the initiative to investigate *me*, much less discover the true identity of who "Kumiko Kawakami" had been talking to in the restaurant that day.

"I messed up. This is going to set me back..."

I ground my molars. I didn't want any of them getting in my way. That was why I planned to dispose of them and had sent Yuuto Kanazaki photos of the disfigured victims to provoke him. After the dust settled, I could go after Kaito

Ukei myself.

If I knew this was going to happen, I would have let the Rebirthers proceed with their plan earlier. I should have realized that they couldn't be trusted when they'd bungled a simple kidnapping by bringing me a dead body.

"...I'll have to tell Onishi to carry out the plan tomorrow. Assuming Kaito Ukei isn't at school, they're going to demand the police hand him over."

Of course, the police would never do that, but with his identity revealed to the public, they would have no choice but to keep a close eye on him. Worst-case scenario, they might even try to take his life again, like with the bomb blast at the police station.

If I didn't capture him before then, things were only going to get more difficult.

It looks like the girl is taking part in the plan, too. That means Kaito will be alone. It should be easy enough to break in and take him, if need be.

That greedy bastard Onishi would probably ask for a higher rate, but money was no object here. As long as it got me to my ultimate goal, I would pay any price, because once I was the world's most powerful mage, money would be unnecessary.

"Tch. So they actually did it..."

In my parked car, I watched a video on my phone. One in which the name "Kaito Ukei" was clearly audible. Of course, the official news sites censored that part, but the original was on the internet somewhere, and that could never be removed.

"It's a good thing I decided to move the schedule up," I said to myself. "Apparently, he didn't want to come easy, but now that he's in the car, there should be no more slipups."

As I observed the barricaded school from the car, I decided to send my homunculus to the handoff point.

With just a handful of dirt, a bit of rabbit blood and flesh, a wooden skeleton, and a drop of my own blood, I had been able to create a puppet in my spitting

image. It followed orders, and I could even project my consciousness into it if I concentrated enough.

There were very few spells I could use, with the mana in this world being so thin, and this was the most useful in my arsenal. It allowed me to create a perfect alibi whenever I liked or get in touch with dangerous parties while keeping myself safe from harm.

It truly was a convenient spell, apart from the fact that the puppet could only hold itself together for a day or so. Or the fact that it would revert to white sand if it got hit with a strong jolt of electricity. And not to mention that the projection took a great deal of concentration.

I closed my eyes and focused, to cast my mind into the homunculus's shell. I headed into the forest, where the abandoned factory lay.

Phew. I should be there soon.

Just then, however...

"Excuse me, could I have a moment? I'm with Yuuhi TV..."

Crap?!

The voice brought me out of my trance, as if someone had been waiting for that exact moment to distract me. The reporter's intrusion angered me greatly, but eager not to stir up trouble at this critical moment, I put on my prizewinning smile and politely encouraged her to take her questions elsewhere. However, when I returned to my homunculus, I realized it had tripped when I'd left it and broken its leg. Now it flailed helplessly on the ground.

"Grr, it's useless now. Release!"

At my command, the doll collapsed into white sand. Luckily, I had a spare, but this setback was going to make me late to the handoff. Still, I had no choice, so I sighed and sent an update to Onishi to inform him of my delay, then projected my mind into the other homunculus.

After a short while, some of the gauges and meters I'd brought into the car began going off.

"Ah, those two have already started, have they?"

According to my research, even non-mages caused disruptions in the flow of mana when their emotions flared high. This was one of the reasons I was waiting outside the school in my car. I was hoping to observe this effect in action, incited by the anger of those two schoolkids and the Rebirthers' fear. The homunculus could not do this job for me; while it could read the instruments, it lacked the physical senses to detect changes in the mana directly.

"I'll just sit it down under this tree..."

Taking care not to make the same mistake twice, I left the homunculus in a safe location before ending the projection. I would take a few readings before heading to meet Onishi.

"Wow... This place really is special. The flow of mana here is like nothing else I've ever seen... Looks like things went well for those two."

The readings here were on the same level as those I'd taken in my lab, yet there had been no magical serums applied in this location. I could have made such progress, if only I had been able to conduct my experiments here.

"I suppose that's because the walls of reality have been broken down not once but twice here... Oh, crap, the time."

I'd spent far longer poring over the results than I intended. My head was filled with theories and experiments I wanted to conduct. Just as I was pondering what to do with Kaito Ukei once I got my hands on him, I snapped back to my senses.

"I need to project back into the homunculus and— Whoa, what's with these readings?!"

At that moment, as if on cue, the dials and meters started flipping out.

"Are they broken? I've never seen numbers this high before!"

These devices were based on designs left to me by my ancestors, improved to a much greater degree of sensitivity using modern technology. They were capable of measuring the level of supernatural phenomena in a location, and the levels were higher than I'd ever seen them just now.

“Th-they’re still rising! B-but these readings...they’re consistent with the casting of a Grand Ritual! How could a spell like that be cast in a world depleted of mana?!”

As I continued watching in shock, something happened right before my eyes. Something I couldn’t write off as a simple sensor malfunction.

“Aaaaaaghh...! H-huh?”

“Eek! Huh? We’re outside?”

“—EEEEELP! Huh?”

The crowd around the school burst into chaos. And little wonder, for suddenly and without warning, every last student and staff member trapped within the school materialized in the courtyard.

“...Teleportation magic?”

My brain stopped working.

It had taken me days of focus and preparation just to move an eraser ten centimeters.

“Ha-ha... This is amazing! So it really is possible to cast spells like that in this world...!”

I felt my blood begin to rise, like bubbling oil. Think of the research potential! I wanted to go to my lab right away!

But as soon as that feeling passed, a troubling thought occurred.

“...Wait. Just who cast that spell...?”

To my knowledge, nobody in the world, let alone inside that school, was capable of such a feat.

“Just who was it...?”

My question went unanswered.



“...Goddammit, why won’t they pick up?!”

I threw my phone at the sofa as the call failed to go through once again.

Three days had passed since the incident at the school, and people were still talking about it. If anything, there was more buzz about it now than ever.

Shortly after everyone was teleported out of the school, the police had burst into the building to find it completely empty, save for a pile of corpses in the room where the Rebirthers filmed their demand video.

It was obvious from the state of the bodies they had been brutally murdered, and the police decided to keep this discovery a secret to keep the public calm. However, a video soon surfaced online of a boy and girl, their faces blurred, perpetrating the heinous crime.

For a few days, it was all the news talked about.

“Everyone’s ghosting me. First Onishi, now Yuuto Kanazaki. Even Mai won’t pick up her phone!”

I thought the abduction had gone perfectly, but when I arrived with my homunculus at the handoff point, there was nobody there. I waited and waited, but Onishi never showed, nor did he answer my attempts to get in touch with him.

So I went to check on the Ukei household myself, but it was completely deserted. I started to worry; things weren’t going to plan at all.

Posing as “Kumiko Kawakami,” I had devised a ploy to dispose of the Rebirthers. I was even the one to suggest filming it, as a lesson to the others. Of course, I only subtly hinted at this, just enough so that Yuuto would think the idea was his own.

I was to receive the video, edit out their faces, and post it on an underground forum, where the Rebirthers were sure to see it but the public would not. If word got out, it was possible that the identities of the two perpetrators would be revealed.

However, word *had* gotten out, and yet nobody had gotten in touch with me. I was in the dark, with no idea what was going on.

I was desperate.

“Aargh, this is so frustrating! How am I supposed to advance my research

without a specimen?! I can't even get into the school because the whole place is sealed off! Why has everything gone wrong?!"

"You want to go to the school, do you? Excellent."

Suddenly, as though an ice cube had fallen down my back, I heard a voice from behind.

"Who's there?!"

I spun around to find a man standing before me. With his leather armor and black cape, he looked like he'd just stepped straight out of a fantasy novel.

"K-Kaito? Wh-what are you wearing? H-how did you get in here?"

I instinctively adopted the same tone of voice I'd used with him in the past.

"Hmm, yes. It's an excellent mask. Very well-made."

"E-er... What are you—? Agh?!"

Just as I looked around to see where he'd appeared from, I felt electricity course through my body.

"A mix of modern technology and magical engineering...or at least your hilarious imitation of it," Kaito explained. "Damn, why did it have to be you? This is going to leave a bad taste in my mouth for sure."

"...Grgh...ghh..."

"You were supposed to be her friend. You were supposed to be there for her. Why's everyone got to be such a backstabbing piece of crap?"

A dizzying sensation came over me, and the next thing I felt was the cold, hard floor on my cheek. My whole body stung, as if pricked with pins and needles, but a thousand times worse. It was hard to even breathe.

"*Satomi*. There's a very good reason I didn't leave you to the others. I want to make you pay for hurting my sister, personally."

As I lay there paralyzed on the floor, I heard him speak my true name. The one that hadn't met my ears in so long.



“...The world can be so cruel sometimes.”

She seemed knowledgeable in magic, so I'd turned my “Appraise” skill upon her just as a precaution. Yet the name I saw took me by surprise: that of the very same girl who'd supposedly died a month before I returned, whose death had sparked Mai's crusade against the Rebirthers.

I didn't believe it at first. However, the magical traces of the atrocities she'd committed here in her own basement were too obvious to ignore.

“I hope for your sake you can come up with a good enough excuse for those two,” I said, though somehow, it didn't seem likely.

After paralyzing her with the Teardrop Blade of Lightning, I lifted Kawakami... or rather, Satomi, and teleported us both to a room in the locked school building. My two newest partners in crime were waiting there, Yuuto wearing a look of barely concealed disgust, and Mai wearing one of surprise.

“Welcome back, Kaito. And Kawakami...or should I say Satomi?”

“Dear brother...is she really...?”

“Yeah, I'm afraid so. There's a tiny bit of magic holding the whole thing together, though, so I'm not surprised you couldn't tell.”

I placed my fingers at the back of the girl's neck, where there seemed to be nothing at all, took hold of the edge of her mask, and tore it off.

“See for yourself.”

Beneath it was a face even I recognized.

“Satomi... You're really alive...”

“...So it's true. I can't believe she duped us this whole time. Magic's a real pain in the ass.”

“...Khh...ghh...uh...”

Satomi was still unable to respond, due to the paralysis, so I cuffed her to a chair before undoing it.

“You should be able to talk now,” I said. “Better apologize while you have the chance. I'm sure you have a few things to say before you die, don't you? The

more questions you answer, the longer you get to live.”

“...Ghh. I see, so it was you who activated that teleportation spell, Kaito. I guess you were granted power when you crossed heaven’s realm.”

Now she spoke not in Kumiko’s voice but in the soft, airheaded tones of Mai’s friend, Satomi Saito, that I recalled in the back of my mind.

“...If you’re Satomi, then who did I see getting stabbed that day?” Mai asked.

“A homunculus, a magical golem I created. School and parents and all that teen stuff were getting on my nerves, you know? I needed space to be the best mage in the world. So I figured it would be a lot easier if ‘Satomi Saito’ was dead. I considered just going missing, but then I heard about someone else targeted by the summoning spell who I wanted to kidnap for my research. That’s when it hit me—if there was a huge murder case, that would distract from the abduction, wouldn’t it?”

Satomi gave a pleasant chuckle.

“But it didn’t turn out that smoothly... I didn’t expect Mai to show up at all, and the Rebirthers accidentally killed the target anyway. What a pickle!”

“Grh!”

Argh, dammit, I wanted to get started right away. This girl had zero remorse.

Mai frowned. “Why, Satomi? Did you really do all that to Yuuki?”

“Yeah!” she respond in her usual cheery voice. “Cause you see, she was suspicious of me. I think she had a hunch I was experimenting on Kaori, so I had to turn her into a specimen.”

“Grh!! A specimen? A specimen?!”

“Rhh! Why...?”

Mai and Yuuto twisted their faces in disgust.

“Why did you do that, Satomi? We were friends, weren’t we? What about when you visited me in the hospital, when you cried for me? Were you just faking it?!”

“Not really. I liked you both. That’s why I didn’t want to make you into test

subjects at first. But Yuuki betrayed me. She started getting all suspicious of me, even though we were supposed to be friends! Isn't that mean? I was really hurt, you know. So I made her help with my research, as payback."

"S-Satomi... I can't believe you...," Mai said.

"Now you're doing it, too! You're both such awful friends!"

"...No more questions," said Mai dejectedly. "Ah-ha-ha. I've been such an idiot. I nearly lost my mind...even troubled my dear brother because of you."

At that moment, Mai shed the part of her heart that still harbored love for her old friend.

"...Can I ask you a question, then? Why did you kidnap Kaori?" Yuuto asked.

"Huh? Why did I choose her, you mean? No reason. I guess if I had to say, she seemed like the easiest?" Satomi answered.

"Huh?"

Yuuto was aghast at the girl's nonchalant reaction.

"I saw her playing by herself in the park one day and told her that she could help save Shiori if she came with me. That's all, really."

"That's it?! That's the reason you...? Hee-hee-hee... Ah-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

Yuuto could do nothing but laugh. The more I looked at him, tearing at his hair and with tears streaming from his eyes, the more I was reminded of myself, and my blood began to boil.

"...All right, psycho lady. So what's your endgame? What's been the purpose of your life up to this point?"

"To become the greatest mage who ever lived, of course! You must understand, Kaito, since you've been through the realm of heaven yourself and seen all the mana there. I want to tear a hole in the world and allow the other realm's mana to drain into ours, watering this parched earth. With the power of legend restored, and the talents granted to me by blood, I'll become an even more powerful mage than my ancestors were!"

“You? The greatest mage in the world? Forget it. You haven’t got a lick of talent. You can’t even tell there’s mana in the air when it’s all around you. Did you really think this world was sucked dry? If you’re making mistakes like that, you’re never going to be the world’s greatest mage or whatever.”

“...*Sigh*. This is why I can’t stand amateurs. You think you’re an expert just because you can sling a few spells? According to accounts in the Kuroi Papers, the power of heaven’s realm assists your spellcraft without you even realizing it. Yes, this city has quite high levels of mana concentration, but that’s only because you’ve been across the void and back, tearing two holes in the fabric of the world.”

“...Whatever. It’s no use trying to talk to people like you. Anything else you guys want to ask her?”

“No, that’s it... I already want to strangle her to death, but I’m too weak right now. I’ll let you do it, Kaito.”

“...Dear brother, I have asked everything I need. The Satomi I know is already dead.”

There was no trace of doubt in their eyes as they stared down at the girl lying on the floor. In Yuuto’s, I saw a burning hate, like a frozen flame. In Mai’s, I saw a profound disappointment, like a child gazing at a broken toy.

“You’re both so mean...! But I’ve bought myself enough time now. Magic circle, activate!”

Satomi gave an evil grin and threw up a barrier made of interconnected pentagons.

“Hee-hee. Let your guard down because I was in handcuffs, didn’t you? This barrier cannot be destroyed unless I say so!”

“...Fine, I’ll bite. So what?”

“The police are already on their way. And all the mana in this room is currently going toward maintaining this barrier. There’s none left for you to do any teleporting tricks! Once the police arrest you, I’ll buy up the entire school and make it so nobody can come near! Without all this mana, you can’t cast any of your spells, can you? I’ll have the whole thing to myself!”

...She was delusional. There were people like this in the other world, too. People so drunk on self-importance that they would cling to whatever theories served their own purpose, whether the facts agreed with them or not.

Satomi truly believed her hypothesis was ironclad, when in fact it was riddled with holes.

“...Whatever. Let’s just get on with it.”

There was no use arguing any further, so I decided to spare myself the effort.

“I am the one who stands above it all:

Whose wise commands no rebel can deny;

Whose feats bring the impossible to pass;

Who sits alone in castrum tall.

When birds embark on feather’d wings, to fly,

They follow paths that I alone have traced.

Alike with stars above in orbits fix’d,

Till mankind’s fortresses do fall.

Sword of Sin: Castle of the Lonely King.”

A long chain made of several interlinked crowns appeared in my hand, and at its end, a young boy with blond hair. A gleaming crown sat atop his head, and he peered down his nose at everything around him, brimming with all the confidence of an emperor.

His throne hovered in the air, and atop it he sat, resting his head in one arm, the living embodiment of the deadly sin he depicted.

“Hmph,” he said. *“Took you long enough, you nincompoop.”*

“Oh, put a sock in it, Pride. Nobody likes a show-off. And how come you kept showing up in my dreams anyway? I thought you were supposed to be sealed away.”

“Sealed? A risible thought. Everything in this world belongs to me. Every beast, every law. Besides, I thought I impressed upon you the importance of respect. So

kneel, knave."

"As if. We have a job to do, so come on. Give your order."

"Oh? You're quite sure? I thought you despised this power."

A mischievous smile crept across the boy's lips.

"Yeah, I do. But I can't argue that it gets results. And right now, I need it."

The seven Swords of Sin each possessed reality-bending powers, but this one, Pride's, was the most wicked of all. Plus, unlike the others, there were no convoluted hoops to jump through to activate its abilities, just a cost exacted when everything was over.

That being said, I didn't like using this power.

"So how would you like me to change the world today? Speak, and I shall lend you my ear."

"I want you to use her."

I pointed at Satomi, who still wore the same smirk as before.

"Take her entire existence and use it to open a path to the other world. There's been two bridges here already. Should be easy, right?"

"Hmph. Very well. I am in a pleasant mood. I suppose I shall grant your request."

All right, seems like there's no problem, I thought. I had worried that perhaps even a person's entire existence wasn't enough to substitute for the lives of two hundred people, but it sounded like Pride could handle it.

"Hmm, summoned a spirit, have we? Well, it doesn't matter what you try; this shield repels every form of attack, even magical ones!"

"You sure of that? This is your last chance to broaden your mind before you die in ignorance."

"You just don't get it, do you? This abjuration is the greatest defensive art my ancestors ever designed. No attack can—"

"Creation, by my hand unbound; all life and death obeys the crowned. *Royal Decree.*"

An upside down crown appeared out of thin air and slammed into the ground around Satomi and her barrier. This was the clear crown: an abhorrent power that violated the sanctity of life itself. It allowed the caster to dictate what became of the target's very being, and the king's rule was one that no force could defy.

"This ability lets me take away your existence," I explained, as the crown began to spin. "Not just your life, or your soul, but all of it, from beginning to end. Everything you were, and everything you could possibly be."

"My existence? Who do you think you are? God? It's so obvious you're bluffing!"

"God? No, you couldn't be further from the truth. This...is the power of the devil."

The crown suddenly stopped spinning and began closing in on her. Meanwhile, a second diadem appeared, this one golden instead of transparent.

"As I explained, this is going to rewrite the world so that you never existed. Nobody but us three will remember you. Everything you did will have been done by somebody else—or something else—instead. Your past will be utterly erased, and your future, too."

As the clear crown shrank, the golden crown grew larger and larger.

"H-how?! How did you get past my barrier?!"

"You won't even get to be reincarnated. Your body and soul will be removed from reality entirely," I said. "Oh, and by the way, it'll hurt. A lot."

At last, the clear crown closed around Satomi, and she cried out.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!!"

It was a scream of unimaginable agony.

"What's happenniiiiing?! Make it stoppppp!! Give it baaaaaaack!!"

She wailed as if deranged, but I did nothing. The clear crown proceeded to drink her up, slowly turning a pale pink as it did, like it was gorging itself on her blood.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Serves you right, bitch!”

“Please be quiet, Satomi. You’re only getting what you deserve.”

Yuuto and Mai, who had been watching in silence up until that point, took the opportunity to voice their disgust. However, I doubted Satomi could even hear them over the sound of her own screams.

“No! No! Nooooooooooooo!!”

“Aah, music to my ears. Let’s hear you scream and suffer, more than little Kaori ever did!”

“Well said, friend of Kaito. The tones of wailing peasants far outclass any orchestra.”

Pride closed his eyes and listened, a smile of fulfillment on his face. When at last the screaming died down, the clear crown was little more than a flat ring, dark red with blood. Then the golden crown, which had grown to about three meters across, suddenly rose up onto its edge and became a circular portal, leaking light into the room.

“Ready, you two? This portal should take us to the other side. No idea where we’ll come out, of course.”

“Let us depart, dear brother. I’d rather not be alone anymore.”

“Sure, there’s nothing left for me in this world anyway.”

I took both their hands, hoping that we would all end up in the same location, and I turned toward the portal. I could hardly believe how badly I’d wanted to come back to this place once, and now my feelings were the exact opposite. How ironic.

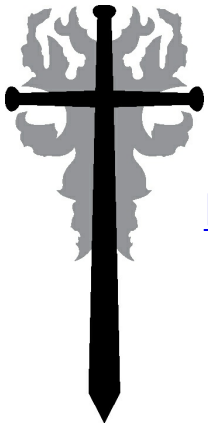
“Now then, who knows what’s about to happen? Hopefully, there’s some kind of landmark nearby, at least.”

“Preferably a starting village for us newbies,” said Yuuto.

“I wouldn’t hold my breath if I were you,” said Mai. “This is my useless brother we’re talking about, so I wouldn’t be surprised if he took us straight to the demon lord’s castle.”

“Oh, Mai, please don’t say things like that.” I sighed. “You’ll jinx it.”

Then, without so much as a parting glance, we stepped through the portal, to a faraway land.



EPILOGUE

The moment we stepped into the portal, it was like getting washed away by a raging current. Coming back to earth had felt like falling, but this time it was as though gravity had reversed, and we felt ourselves lifted into the air. There was no sensation of my soul being stripped away this time as well.

“...Whooooa?!”

“...D-dear brother?!”

Still, I was the only person in the group who had experienced the trip between worlds before. Yuuto and Mai were about as composed as could be expected.

We were bathed in light of a color we had no name for.

The first time I came here, I hadn't known what was happening.

The second time, I'd been robbed of my memories.

On both occasions, I'd been too distracted to look around, so now that I was finally taking in the eeriness of the place for the first time, it sent a shiver up my spine.

“Wh-what the...?!”

The void between worlds? But there was surely something here. Something that felt far greater and far more powerful than anything I'd ever encountered. I was terrified, as if just a glimpse of its true nature might undo me.

And no sooner did I gulp in horror than I heard a voice, and time came to a

sudden stop.

“Hmm. So you finally notice my gaze on your third visit. So wonderfully anomalous, in everything you do. Tee-hee-hee. How fascinating.”

The voice was accompanied by an oppressive force that made me want to do nothing but cower in fright. The only time I'd felt anything like it was when I'd faced off against the evil dragon.

...Rgh.

I couldn't speak. Couldn't breathe.

“Since you've been so kind as to notice my presence, allow me to gift you a key. And as a reward for breaking my spell, a little bonus. Now go, and live the life you so desperately seek.”

I felt something enter my body. Before I could figure out what it was, time started flowing again, and the feeling of something pressing on my skull suddenly vanished.

“Wh-what just...?”

“Wh-what's the matter, Kaito?”

“Did you make a mistake? Are you a little failure of a brother?”

“No!”

It seemed neither of them had heard the voice. However, before we could discuss this, we reached the end of our interdimensional leap.

“Dwagh!”

“Ugh!”

“Hyu!”

We didn't exactly stick the landing. I couldn't keep my balance because I was still holding Mai and Yuuto by the hand, so the three of us fell flat on our faces.

“Grh. Well, that was embarrassing...”

I rose to my feet, a little disappointed I hadn't gotten to show off, and looked around to figure out where we were.

A forest. But not a very thick one. However, the strangest thing by far was the ground.

“Ptoo! Ptoo! Huh, so this is what the other world looks like...”

“Ugh... My mouth is full of sand, useless brother. Could you not have magicked us a softer landing or something?”

Yuuto and Mai both stood up and brushed the dust off their clothes, before peering around with great interest.

“...Dear brother, do trees usually grow in sand in this world?”

It was a very good question. The trees before our eyes were blue with red leaves, and their trunks spiraled like springs. And yes, they appeared to be growing straight out of the barren, sandy earth.

“Some do,” I said. “It really depends.”

Thankfully, we didn’t appear to have teleported inside the demon lord’s castle after all. Judging by the sand and the bizarre flora, we had to be in the beast lands, or at least somewhere close by. I’d leave the theory to the geologists, but for whatever reason, that was the only place where these fantasy plants grew in forests. They existed across the lands, but not in such great numbers as these.

“I grow weary, Kaito. I am returning to my slumber,” came Pride’s voice, with just a touch of disappointment.

I didn’t know you guys even got tired, I wanted to say, but I doubted it would lead to fruitful conversation, so I opted to keep my mouth shut.

Pride raised his hand toward the crown we had just stepped through, and it suddenly shrank down to the size of a ring and jumped into his palm.

“Now, it is time to collect what I am owed,” he said.

“Sure, sure. So what do you want this time?” I asked.

After using his power, Pride would go back to lying dormant within me, and I would be unable to call upon him for a week. Before that, though, he would always collect something from me. One time, he took my arm and didn’t give it back for three months. Another time, it was my eyes. Once, he even stole my MP, so that I couldn’t use any of my soul blades at all. I didn’t know how he

decided what to take, but it was always inconvenient.

“Hmm, well, I was thinking of taking your left arm for six months. However, I’ve already collected my payment through other means. A bonus, they said. And they were quite insistent about it.”

Hmm? Could that be what that voice was talking about?

I thought back to the terrifying presence that spoke to me in the gap between worlds. They had said they would give me a “bonus.”

“Thus, I have nothing to take from you. This time.”

And with that, Pride went back inside me.

I had no idea what had just happened, but it seemed I’d gotten off lightly. So then why did it feel like I’d spent all my pocket money on something expensive?

“...Anyway, we’d better move. I can’t tell where we are yet, but if we just keep heading west, I bet we’ll reach a road eventually. Then we can follow that to a town and— Get down!!”

“What? Whaah?!”

“Whoa?!”

I sensed the attack just moments before it came. I grabbed the others and leaped aside, and a tendril of wood stabbed into the ground where we had just been standing.

The tentacle itself was nothing short of bizarre. It was formed of black, intertwined branches and was covered in fluffy warts, which in turn contained tiny lipless mouths, gnashing their teeth and taking in mana from the air.

As soon as I saw it, a tiny pebble lodged itself in the cogwheels of my mind.

Then a humanoid figure approached, with dead eyes like a zombie’s. The wooden tendrils extended from his arms.

“Bwubwubwuuuugh...”

I recognized the sight immediately.

“An Offshoot?!”

This couldn't be. How could they be appearing already?

Could the seed within Leticia have started to grow?

I felt the blood drain from my face. In the back of my mind tugged a possibility so frightening, I didn't even want to consider it.

If that's the case, and she's already lost control...

Then everything would turn out to be a repeat of the first time.

An Offshoot was a type of monster Leticia had created from human corpses after the Demonlight Tree consumed her and drove her berserk. If they were showing up, that meant that the seed—the core of her strength as the demon lord—had already taken root. The love of my life, reduced to nothing more than an instrument for preserving the status quo.

"K-Kaito? Is that...a monster?"

Yuuto couldn't possibly have known any of this. To him, it was just a strange-looking plant-creature.

Before my mind had fully caught up, I leaped into action, summoning my soul blade and activating its ability.

"O brazier's light, Gaurandi the Kin-Eaters!"

I swung the Flaming Sword of Wheels, and from the sweeping flames emerged a pair of foxes made of fire. The animals latched on to the Offshoot with their jaws, setting it alight.

"Bwubwabwubwubwuuugh?!"

In mere moments, the creature was reduced to a charred lump of coal, which fell to the earth and disintegrated.

However, my unease was not abated.

"No... No..."

"Dear brother?"

"Kaito?"

My partners in crime turned to me, but I could say nothing to ease their

concern. I was gripped by a despair I hadn't felt for so long, and hoped I never would again, as though something was creeping toward me under cover of darkness.

Is it all going to happen again?

Then I was swamped by a crushing powerlessness, as if all light had suddenly vanished, and the cliff at my toes began to crumble.

I'm going to lose her again, and there's nothing I can do to—

Just as that thought was about to consume me, I heard it.

"...OooooooooaaaaaAAAAAHHH!!"

"Blurk!"

From out of the sky, something landed on me, squashing me flat. Then I heard Yuuto's voice.

"...Wow, we really are in a fantasy world. I think I read a book once where this happened, Kaito. Lucky you."

"Yuuto? I hope you're not insinuating what I think you're insinuating. My dear brother is the last man on earth to deserve such a self-indulgent fairy-tale romance. Don't you think?"

"Huh? O-oh, er, of course, Mai. Reality and fiction are two completely separate things, after all."

"I'm glad you agree."

I wasn't quite able to piece together what Yuuto and Mai were muttering about, but as the dust cleared, I rose to my feet, clutching my head as if to scrape together the wreckage of my train of thought.

"What just happened...?"

As soon as I realized just what, or, more to the point, *who*, had landed atop me, my mind went blank, and time ground to a sudden halt.

"*Peh! Peh!* Argh, what damnable luck. How am I ever going to get the dust out of my clothes?"

I could never forget that voice. It was the very voice that stole my heart all

those years ago.

“...”

A sudden gust of wind blew, tearing the cloud of dust aside.

“Now, who might you be? I’m terribly sorry for using you as my cushion just now.”

The sunlight dashed against her scarlet hair, casting a smattering of prismatic light.

“L-Leticia!!”

“Hmm? Nyagh?!”

Before I even knew what was going on, I was holding her in my arms. I’d been waiting to see her for so, so long! Just one look at her swept away the encroaching despair.

“I’m so glad you’re okay. I’ve missed—”

I didn’t care what this meant. I didn’t care how it happened.

“H-hey! Unhand me at once! What do you think you’re—?”

“No!!”

I clutched her slender frame, ignoring her struggles to break free.

“I’m never letting you go!” I cried. “Never again!!”

For one precious moment, everything else vanished from my mind, and I was alone with her in my arms. For so long, I had regretted abandoning her. In my dreams, all I felt was her warmth leaving my touch. However...

“Rgh!! I said hands off, you brain-dead buffoon!!”

“Bwuh?!”

Her scream and the impact of her mana-strengthened gut punch brought me back to harsh reality. I went flying into a nearby tree, which exploded in a cloud of dust.

“Really?” said Leticia, placing her hands on her hips. “Who do you think you are? I’m already in a sour mood because I slipped and fell from that tree while

tracking down the one that got away. The last thing I want is to be manhandled by a stinky pervert like you!”

Leticia gave an indignant snort and swept her long, pretty hair from her shoulder. Meanwhile, I lay motionless at the base of the tree, arms and legs spread.



“Normally, I would tear you limb from limb for this,” she went on, “but you are in luck. I’m very busy today, you see, so I’m willing to let this rudeness go unpunished, so long as you lie there and reflect on what you’ve done.”

With that, Leticia gave me one last glance before a magic portal appeared out of nowhere and carried her away.

As for me, it felt like my whole body was still shaking, so I did as she asked and lay still. I didn’t feel like moving anyway. The dizzying series of events of the preceding few moments had stripped me of my energy.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha... Thank god...”

Leticia was alive. She was still okay.

I thought I’d lost her, once again, without being there for her.

I never wanted to reexperience what I’d felt that day.

“...Dear brother?”

Suddenly, Mai’s face appeared above mine. She didn’t sound pleased.

“Uhh... Mai?”

Once again, reality reared its ugly head. This time, it was the crazed grin across my dear little sister’s lips.

Then an objective view of what I’d just done played in my head, like a movie.

“Oh boy, Kaito,” said Yuuto with a sigh. “Don’t look at me for help.”

Traitor! I would show him later what happened to those who double-crossed me. For now, though, I had to think of a way to appease the demonic woman in front of me.

“W-wait, Mai, you’ve got it all wrong. I was overcome with emotion! I couldn’t help myself! It was an act of God or something! And besides, I wasn’t acting untoward! It’s like, you know, when there’s a kiss scene in a movie or at the end of a fairy tale! People are just taken by the mood; there’s nothing *lewd* about it, is there? Is there? Well, I don’t think there is, at least...”

“Oh, my poor, delusional brother. Somebody’s going to call the police on you, one of these days...”

Oh dear. There was no talking my way out of this one.

I crawled backward, only to come up against the trunk of a tree, and Mai grabbed me by the shoulder.

“I didn’t realize you lost control of yourself around little girls, even when they’re trying to fight back...”

“W-wait, let me explain,” I pleaded, throwing my hands up in surrender. “It might not be possible, but let me try... *Gyuh?!*”

Mai pinched my cheek.

“Dear brother, I don’t think you have the right to speak. Do you?”

“H-haybe?”

“Shut up, you pedophile.”

“Hedohile?! ”

Sure, Leticia was a little *developmentally challenged*, but she wasn’t a child. And what was wrong with flat chests anyway?

“I’m very disappointed in you, dear brother. What were you thinking? Answer me, Kaito. We’re having a conversation here.”

“I hon’t know! I hon’t know!”

The light in Mai’s eyes didn’t return until I got on my knees and promised never to do it again.

“Right, let’s try this again. We’re heading for the nearest town.”

“It was you who lost your senses and regressed to a wicked brute,” said Mai, giving me the evil eye. Beside her, Yuuto shrugged and flashed a grin of resignation.

“Yeah, I agree, man. I get where you’re coming from, but you brought this on yourself.”

“Right! Let’s try this again! We’re heading for the nearest town!!”

Our new life had gotten off to a rocky start, but I had to move past it. There were things that needed to be done. Our top priority was getting to a town and

finding out just what was going on. Yuuto and Mai would need to be trained in combat as well.

Since returning to this world, I'd noticed that I could once again feel a connection with Minnalis and Shuria, though it was faint. Even though I knew they could hold their own, I still wanted to meet back up with them as soon as I could.

Plus, there was Metelia to consider. She had sent me back to Earth, leaving Minnalis and Shuria behind. How had they survived their encounter with her?

Finally, there was the Offshoot I had just encountered. If Leticia was not yet consumed by the Demonlight Tree, then what exactly had given birth to it? It was weaker than I remembered, too. I wondered what to make of it all.

Now, if these were the beast lands, then that meant I could expect to find one person in particular here.

A man who could flatten a horde of monsters with a single punch. And also the man responsible for betraying me and setting in motion the events leading to Leticia's death.

And also, if Leticia was here, then that implied the presence of a second entity I needed to kill.

Two people who'd led her to death, here in this very country.

There was much to do, and precious little time. I needed to think long and hard about how their lives would end.

It was time to deliberate. Time to put my mind to work and come up with a way to force them to taste despair.

Because I would never forgive what they'd done. Never forget how they'd betrayed us.

Whatever lofty ideals they harbored, whatever noble intent.

They would taste pain in all its forms.

They would be judged, not by notions of good or evil, but by pure emotion.

No laws, no punishment. Only a bloody execution.

And they would succumb to the most brutal torture my mind could conjure.

They'd stolen the life of the woman I loved more than anything else in the world. I would not let them do so again.

This time, my vengeance wasn't just for myself. Just this once, it was for her.

Leticia had suffered enough. She'd had to put up with my stupidity. So I needed to put a stop to this before it hurt her any more.

So that she could live just a little longer.

...Even if that meant I would have to betray her myself.

Leon Gailed, the fighter and second crown prince of the beast lands of Grandia.

And Lilia Lu Harleston, elder sister of Leticia, the demon lord.

"I'll kill you both, I swear it. I'll steep you in agony until you can no longer feel pain, then drag you so far beneath the waves that even we won't be able to imagine your despair."

The two of you are going to keep me company in hell.

That was my oath, the one that remained, even after all else was taken from me.

The Hero Laughs
While Walking the Path of
VENGENCE
a Second
Time

NERO KIZUKA

Illustration by SINSORA

“This is
where true
vengeance
begins.”

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